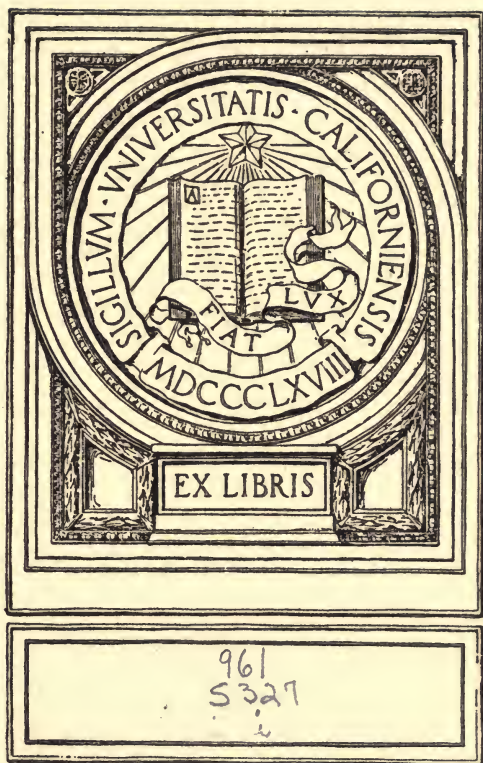


*The Immortal
Gymnasts
by
Marie Cher*





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The Immortal Gymnasts

M A R I E C H E R

THE IMMORTAL GYMNASTS

BY

MARIE CHERC *proceed. J.*

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NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE IMMORTAL GYMNASTS

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CHAPTER ONE

POOOR old Papa Comedy, once Carnival King of all Italy, lay dying obscurely in the narrow Paris lodging whither he had been brought by his faithful secretary, Messer Goldoni, seeking in vain a life-giving air across the frozen Alps.

Three of those Essential Spirits in whom he had incarnated the happiest strokes of his genius—Pantaloön, Harlequin, and Columbine—stole away weeping, when all was over, from the shrouded bed in the poor attic room, and sought a refuge by recrossing the border into Italy. Pantaloön, venerable but elastic, supported the youthful Columbine, while Harlequin, tall and slender, supple and gay, charged himself with the conduct of their meagre baggage-train.

Ages ago, these waifs from Cloudland, stragglers from the World of the Fourth Dimension, restless pioneers of the subconscious, had entered, of their own free will, the infinitely more restricted life sustained by this poor old planet of ours. Earth-bound for the moment, confused and charmed at once by the novelty of their surroundings, they had fallen into the hands of Papa Comedy, then young and strong, footing it lustily through all the land of Italy. They served him well, according to the age and sex they had half-consciously adopted in the beginning and thereafter kept unchanged. Thus Pantaloön is always the grey-

beard, Harlequin the man of thirty, and Columbine the fresh, fair, youthful woman.

Behind them lay a century of adventures in the Italian States, which Pantaloon has a mind to edit some day, when the evenings are long and when one is old and not a very good sleeper. Here Columbine interrupts with a laugh and says, "But what of those long afternoon naps?" Women are ever inconsequent. At least Pantaloon has committed to writing the Adventure of the Poet in the House on the Corso, for no one now alive, save these three, has heard the great Goethe speak. He was a young man then, with a certain fame, handsome and gay, discovering his Italy. Do you know that land?

But, the years gathering one upon another, our three Essential Spirits, having lost the power to change back to their Fourth Dimension, moving from place to place over half Europe, first in one disguising occupation, then in another, felt the weight of earth-bound life encroaching, little by little, on their cloud-heritage—surely Pantaloon was becoming older, more worn, more bent; Harlequin had grey streaks in his brown hair, networks of tiny, humorous lines around his deep kind eyes; and Columbine, no longer the bud of a young maid, had mellowed, ripened, and expanded into the fair flower of, say, twenty-nine. All three were certainly "coming on," and they needed a change of environment. Language presenting no bar to them, they pitched upon England, that moist isle, and London, that cloudy leviathan, as the home for their declension, if decline they must. Having learned what sticklers the English are in matters of respectability,

they decided upon brand-new names and relationships. High Comedy might "go" in Italy, as it once did at the Court of the Grand-Duke of Tuscany, but never in England. So Pantaloon becomes Mister Panton, or Panta, as he is called in the intimacy of his own home, a widower, with one charming daughter, Miss Bina Panta, and a—umph—second cousin, a tall, acrobatic-looking fellow, a Mister—Quin. O agile, brilliant, merry Harlequin, who could trace you here?

Then, still on the trail of respectability, they must needs have some visible means of support. Pantaloon decides to feign to be a commissionaire in delicate health, one seldom able—"Poor man, he has such a cough!"—to run the errands of the neighbourhood. Harlequin, seduced by the roving, picturesque life of the Sandwichman, hastily adopts that calling which is susceptible of being followed, more or less successfully, by either the languid or the athletic. Bina, for her part, practical little housewife, sets up a milk-and-egg-butter-and-cream shop in a small dwelling that serves as roof-tree for them all.

It lurks modestly in that short, back street in the South-West, where all the houses are one storey high, with a scrap of an attic that does not show from the outside, prudishly concealing itself and its tiny windows behind the band of ornamental stucco, more often buff in colour than not, that finishes off the top of the house, as if you were to put a bit of edging on a square morsel of linen. The doorways all describe the form of a narrow Roman arch, cut at the left of two stubby windows. The opening of this wooden door engages the visitor, without preliminaries, in the close gloom of

a hallway that tries to imitate a barrel-vault. The yellowish linoleum under your feet, the yellowish paper on the wall, veined to imitate who knows what Numidian marble, compose no harmonies for your unhappy soul. You begin to breathe only when the back door is open, that carries your eye down two steps into a teacup of a garden where the long, green fingers of untrimmed shrubs straggle across the red-brick path that leads to a pale laburnum, spraying its magic fountain of yellow wine in the corner by the paling.

Bina lives in the house at the end of the row, so that the milk tins can call almost surreptitiously at a side door. The stubby windows have been let down, merged, and inflated in the clever manner known to builders. Within, circular white shelves bear fair blue tiles on which repose the pots of cream, the rounded jars of milk, the pyramids of eggs in wicker baskets, and the cheeses—these tiny, moist ones, each in its own little pannier, oozing drops of cream, the stately Cheshire, the haughty Gorgonzola, the civic Chester, the mild Edam, the coquettish Roquefort, the soft, swelling Camembert in its wooden ring. Below, on white tiles, lie the minted golden coins of the dairy—the pats, the squares, the rounds, the “luscious lumps” of butter of surpassing firmness, fragrance, and colour.

The early morning toilet of this little shop, attended to by Bina in person, involves such a laving with pure water, such a scrubbing and rubbing, such a patting and polishing, such a fresh-filling of baskets and panniers, such a meticulous care in the removal of crumbs and splashes, of chips and flakes, that, even before the two big china bowls that stand behind the milk jars are

filled with rosy garden pinks, sweet basil and sprigs of thyme, you sniff an air as aromatic as lavender, as sweet as a clover meadow.

As you enter the street from the farther end, the rounded window stands out from among the dull house fronts as fresh as a great country posy—all blue and white and yellow, the blue of larkspur, the white of hawthorn, the yellow of cowslips. No wonder that trade is good, no wonder that the coins gather in the till, that the order-book grows plumper and plumper, and the customers sleeker and sleeker fed on such wholesome dainties. Bina herself, busy at her shelves, surrounded by the mild fruits of the field and the dairy, has become a human little Bona Dea, duly engarlanded, flying her Della Robbia colours.

A door with an eyehole of glass in it, in order that Bina may rake the shop when they have left it alone, leads into the heart of the house, into the room of the domestic hearth, of fire, of light, the room where the three friends meet, where Panta has his leather chair and his stand of books, where Quin keeps his pipe, and where Bina sheds her warm, rosy, hospitable, human glow. It is a room of ancient, friendly aspect, won for it by the comfortable, unembarrassed manner of its chairs and its tables, by its ample cupboards built into the corners, whence emerge tea-caddy and cups at the consecrated hours, by its warm, old curtains with their faded pattern of singing birds and leafy branches to draw across the cold, twilight squares of the windows just before you give the fire the gratuitous poke that must ever precede the ceremony of putting on the kettle.

In this room, late one afternoon, Panta broke the silence thus:

"I sometimes forget, Quin, don't you, that we were ever anything else but earth-bound? It is so long since I have been conscious of the faintest stir of that cloud-current that is our heritage. I do believe we have all become almost as Cubical as any of the good people in this very street."

"Why Cubical?" inquired Bina, not unnaturally.

"Panta has been dipping into the Doctor of Harley Street," answered Quin. "He has written an amusing little book in which, actually, our existence as distinct from our earth-bound fellows (whom he calls Cubes, solids, you know, oh, stodgy!) is more than hinted at. It seems that this clever fellow, this nerve specialist, has run across the workings of our cloud-currents, the strange waves that govern our being, as the earth-currents regulate theirs. He has suspected our existence for many years, we and our like, but he has never been able to lay that long, supple, white hand on any of us—feel us, yes, be dimly conscious of a something influencing those black, soundless underpaths in the minds of those poor devils who throng his clinic—but 'get us,' never! There are so few of us left now, this hard, definite, Cubical life bruises, blunts, and finally destroys us. We have dropped down into their atmosphere from our own peculiar Cloudland, and we have lost the way back. We are scouts, perhaps, sent on to smell out the country. But the time is not yet, and we are engulfed and forgotten. We trail our clouds of glory for a time, and then one colour of the sunset dies off after another, and we sink down into the dull, practical,

Cubical grey, lit by no flash, transfigured by no purple and gold. May we not be, perhaps, the great-great-grandchildren of the great-grandchildren of those minor gods who went out into exile when that Voice cried, braving the 'thunder of Pontic seas' (a fine phrase of one of their English poets), that Pan was dead? Some few of us still guard the intuitive knowledge of how to—shall I say—'tap' the earth-currents by means of the touchstone of our own cloud-heritage. It is this intrusion into the minds of his disordered flock that has aroused our Doctor of Harley Street."

"Oh, I see," said Bina, although she didn't quite. "How very interesting."

"How well I remember the old days," continued Panta.

"Before we changed our names and became so oddly respectable," put in the irrepressible Bina.

"Yes, yes," he admitted. "We men of Cloudland were devils of fellows, eh, Quin? Doors and windows, if I recollect, never kept you out, nor roofs either."

"Not when Bina was within, certainly," replied Quin with immense conviction.

"I was inside the little house, to be sure, but it was all of cardboard. Now this shop is solid wood, with a roof that fits it like a skullpiece. That is the difference between Cloudland and Cubeland, between dreams and——"

"Don't say 'reality.' I couldn't stand that," protested Panta.

"Of course, these Cubes are not real. We only pretend they are, because they believe it so passionately themselves. Even we seem Cubical to them, and a

good thing, too, or they would not buy my eggs and milk. You would have to sleep in a cloud-cap, *Panta mio*, instead of in that tidy little—cubical upstairs.”

Here a boy in a brown knitted suit that fitted over his plump little stomach like a second, slightly woolly, skin, came in for an egg. To his Cubical eyes Panta seemed simply an old man with a wisp of beard and a black silk cap; to them, again, Quin was merely a darkish person with nice eyes and extraordinarily long legs, and Bina a pretty girl not unlike his sister.

When the boy had gone, carrying the egg in a minute paper bag, the fellows of which Panta amused himself by cutting and pasting in odd moments, Bina said:

“Are we ever to know what is inside of us?”

“A Cube would tell you fast enough, and coarsely, too, ugh—anatomical charts,” growled Panta.

“Sugar and spice, thyme and honey, for a lady,” sang Quin.

Bina stared at the two men with her large, bright eyes. “Come into the sitting-room and we can talk it out. It is dark enough to pull the curtains, the Cubes are already at their tea, and no one will want even a penny’s worth of anything until to-morrow morning. See how red the heart of the ash is! You don’t need a blaze for toast.”

Panta sat himself down carefully in his leather arm-chair, trying not to slide; Quin crossed his legs on the hearthrug, his favorite lounging place. He held the toasting-fork with the careless ease of an expert, and presently a sweet, familiar, heart-warming smell filled the little room. Bina managed the table and the

service of cups from which they drank their velvety brew—oh, not what Cubes consume from tannin-stained receptacles, but a full, rich, mellow liquid, bronze streaked with gold, in which is caught, melted, fused, transfused, all the sunny magic that rests on Indian fields.

“When I asked what is inside of us,” resumed Bina, as she rinsed the three cups in a hand-bowl, “I did not mean—tummies. I meant thoughts and feelings, passions and pains. We know them when they give us a tug. They bite and tear us like little vicious blind animals, or they caress and warm us with velvet paws. We belong to them, not they to us. We are their lodgings for the night. I don’t like it. I want to make them sign a paper of good conduct at the door.”

Panta had let his thin old body slip down helplessly over the worn leather of his chair, so that he gave the appearance of one who would fain recline upon the floor, if politeness to a lady permitted. He said nothing, being soothed to speechlessness by the warmth and the tea.

Quin raised his tired eyes that kept their incongruous look of faith and hope and youth—but that was because he loved her—to Bina’s face. “You poor child, you. We are the hostels for the imps our ancestors made and left to us. They make themselves at home without a ‘by your leave’; they swagger in our inn parlour, and we suffer them to exploit us without a reckoning. But we have the power, could we use it, to breed up one stout champion to keep these unruly bullies and led captains in order. He appears to me, this hero, to be

dressed in blue, in doublet and hose, with a peaked beard and a frill. He sometimes swings a short cloak from his shoulders, and he is sometimes busy with tablets in his hand. He is tall and rather pale. He presents himself to my imagination in this period, because, like this great namesake of his, he is called—Will——”

“Think all but one, and me in that one ‘Will.’”

Quin sighed, then smiled. Panta was dozing. Bina, having dried her cups, came and sat beside Quin, with her hands about her knees.

“Talk to me,” she murmured, and who wouldn’t have when she looked like that?

“I will tell you of what I was thinking when you spoke of the little beasts that scratch or kiss our souls,” responded Quin. “You know that I have not forgotten all my old tricks. I can still tap the currents of certain Cubical minds, and read what I find there. Now there is a great house in Belgrave Square. There is a portico with tall, channelled columns; a pediment; trophies of arms. There you have the pure absurdity of a dwelling masquerading as a temple, the Cubical idea of dignity, pomposity in stucco. In the vast, dim cellarage are men and maids—a warren of them—fighting, eating, laughing, drinking, put there to serve and to be servile. As a matter of fact, they gossip, lie, and brag.

“Above stairs, in that long, lofty drawing-room, hung with old-fashioned, heavy red, there are candles in brackets, an eighteenth-century lustre to wink and twinkle at night in the clouded, greyish mirrors. If you seat yourself near one of the windows that overlook the square where plane-trees hang their coarse, trembling

leaves over the railings by the cab-rank, you will have enough light, even on dark days, to read your book or your newspaper, but over there, midway the length of the great room, near the fireplace where that trumpery little desk stands, there is a gloomy twilight that irritates your eyelids like those of this girl here, that lies upon them so that you strain them wider and wider over tired eyeballs—a twilight that is not soft and tranquil, but harsh and menacing.

“This girl I tell you of is trying with all her little harassed soul to write a letter, but what words can she find to ache and burn in his brain, as the fever aches and burns in her poor, pretty, tortured body? You must remember that quite by accident, as I’ll explain later, I was plunged into the full flood of her painful little story. There is a chap she calls Ambry, with whom she has been quite desperately engaged for some wild weeks, unknown to mamma, or to anyone else, I gather. He is growing tired, after the fashion of his kind, has even cast an appreciative eye, worse luck! upon the little lady’s more dashing sister. He has lied to Anie—the first girl, you see—has said he was going down to his place at Appleton—an old house among the pines—when in reality he has been flirting with Sister Estelle at Hurlingham. A rather ancient tale, but none the less distressing for the young Anie, who is as helpless and sweet as a small kitten with its starry eyes just open. She has been innocent and mad enough to meet her Ambry, who, at least, should have known better, in the sitting-room of a German ex-governess, as foolishly sentimental an elderly dame as her nation can produce, which is saying a good deal.

"Anie, poor child, is writing now to deliver her wretched little ultimatum that he shall meet her at two o'clock to-morrow at this Fräulein Detmold's. You gather that a painful scene is being prepared. It shows how young she is to pin her faith to any such interview. Her blessed Ambry has fittted for good. One can easily see that."

Here Quin ceases with the manner of one who has closed a book, but who still keeps a finger in the page. Panta has not shifted an inch, his grey old eyelids motionless.

"If I had a little daughter——" began Bina.

"She would be clothed in morning light," said Quin. "But this poor, pretty, hapless child, in that great house with its stucco pomp! What a type of the vicious life that can be led in such places, the life of hollow Cubes, mud-filled more often than not! This Ambry, now, what a fellow for you! With that charm and that blond, amusing masque that has carried him straight through from the nursery, serving him as deftly, as neatly, as unscrupulously as any Caroline groom of the king's closet, as any Baptist May of the Backstairs. An honest man's hands itch for his neck. Yet he and his fellows are such simple sorts of beasts—such physically sane, clean, healthy, pink—ruffians, with their shoulders and their boys' gaze, their swagger and their side. And this poor little rag of a girl in Belgrave Square, with her drowned eyes and her feverish blood, has poured out all the gold of her morning, with its dew and its freshness, over this Ambry's careless hands!"

Quin knocked his pipe against the fender, staring at the little mess of grey ashes that resulted from this

simple act as though, for the first time, the mighty concept called loosely "cause and effect" had swum into his mind. In reality, he felt himself unduly heated by his story, and shamefacedly did not want Bina to remark his sensibility.

"So these pretty maids," said she, "in such great houses, with mothers and grandmothers, fathers, uncles and governesses, break their young wings as easily as any poor friendless girl, come in from the country to sordid alley or stifling shop. The same flesh in both of them goes the same road. But tell me, Quin, when did you run across this little lady? Is her story in the making? Is she living it now from day to day, she and Estelle and Ambry? Or is it something of long ago—something that has burned out and ended?"

"It's as fresh as paint," answered Quin. "It happened yesterday morning. There was I as sandwich-man for this Turkish bath-house in Victoria Street, in my towel suit with a fez. Lord! You know what a sight I am—a change from the spangled tights of the old days, the masque, the lathe, and—you! Well, my beat for the moment is Sloane Street, edging off now and again to the Squares, and yesterday morning this is what happened. The little lady came riding down from the Row, such a thin slip of a creature—you could snap her at the waist between your finger and thumb—in her black habit and her mannish hat over her thick, clubbed hair. Well, her horse lost his head at my fez (I can't blame the brute), reared and snorted, and shook her off like a bit of summer fluff. The groom and I caught her between us. What a figure I cut you may imagine. She barely touched my chest with her

hand to steady herself, and that was all I wanted. Instantly the inner cloud-currents that differentiate us from these Cubical creatures began to send me messages. In a twinkling I was in the little hollow receiving-room of this young girl's mind, where records, millions of them, were being ticked off every second, sent in from every tingling nerve-filament, every instant of her waking life. The touch of the little lady's fingers on my breast gave me the clue. She never knew, you may be sure. To her I was simply a street loafer, a sandwich-man, perhaps a bit more repulsively grotesque than the rest of my peers by reason of my fez and my towelling, but a decent enough chap who caught her not uncleverly when she fell. And there I stood, with the heart of her mystery in my hand while she thanked me in that sweet, high, little pipe of hers, and told me to come to the house in Belgrave Square in all the pride of its columns, its trophies, and its cellarage, its quintessential Cubical prosperity, to be rethanked and paid, because neither she nor the groom had any money on them. So I bowed and removed my fez, and watched her go, riding her subdued mount who seemed the least little bit ashamed of himself. Then I slipped around a corner. Little did she think that she had given me the royal right of way, not to the servants' entrance (*No bottles!*) of the house in Belgrave Square, but to her poor, tortured little mind. I had but to concentrate my cloud-current, sitting quite still up there in my room, and I was more 'on the spot' than had I slid down the chimney in my spangled tights, waving my magic sword."

Bina fixed him with a serious gaze.

"But is it quite fair to the little lady, Quin? She is

so defenceless while you read off her messages, so ignorant that there is anything to hug and hide."

"My dear child, you misunderstand, or you forget," cries Quin. "Were I a Cube like herself, I should be a dastard to read her mind, to pry into her life, because we would both be on the same plane, in the same eddy of the earth-current; what she felt, I would feel, exactly in the same way—a matter of Cubical sensation. It would be a shameful thing for me so to see the little lady, my sister-Cube, off her guard, in that inner chamber where there are no veils for even the most virginal of shrinking souls. It would be as dastardly as an assault for me to peek and pry. But, Bina, thank God, I'm not quite Cubical yet, in spite of the fez, the toweling, the sandwich badge of slavery. The cloud-currents still sway and swing us instead of the earth ones, and, by virtue of that, we can look into other lives with as pure and dispassionate a gaze as the Bon Dieu himself."

Quin pulled his slim length up from the hearthrug, and rested a lean arm on the mantelshelf, smiling down into Bina's eyes. In some old Dutchmen's pictures you see just such fair, smooth faces as hers, warm, golden, glowing with the suave irradiation of firelight or candlelight. Tiny flames seemed to flicker at the end of each curl of hair upon her head, and two of Loki's merry imps lit a dancing jet in each long-lashed eye.

Then their talk drifted off, idly, happily, to the little doings of their common life, while the twilight deepened into evening and night.

Pantaloon, aroused at length by the sudden cessation of their voices, sat bolt upright, pretending at once in

a way old people have that he had never been asleep at all.

"Time for a bit of cheese and then to bed," sang out Panta, speaking sententiously to show that—for, oh, yes, quite several minutes—he had been thinking this over, but had not wished to interrupt them.

Quin and Bina exchanged the amused glances of a very wise, young father and mother whose offspring has surprised them again by some unnatural cleverness.

Bina drew out the leaves of a small wooden table; Quin fetched the square cloth from a drawer; the cheese appeared, a ruddy golden one, knives came to cut it, forks to toast it over the coals, salt to sprinkle it, and small beer in two-handled mugs to circle about it, hot in the mouth. Thus were assembled the minor domestic spirits that keep the heart sweet and man's temper equable.

So the three friends sat down to their sober snack in the little room behind the shop—these three inheritors of ancient glory, these fluid changelings dropped from Hither-Space into a hard, definite, Cubical world, that in a twinkling has caught them in its electric traps, and broken them to its labour—Quin to the harness of the sandwich-board, Panta to the brass badge of the odd-job-man, and soft, young Bina to the till and the counter, the scales, and the swinging door of the little shop.

CHAPTER TWO

“WELL, I won’t go, that’s flat. Go to that crazy old German woman’s, and begin the whole, awful thing again? I simply can’t. I simply won’t.”

He crammed the letter into his pocket, the flushed, angry young face lowering across the little table laid for breakfast, where a despoiled dish of kidneys and an empty toast-rack unemotionally testified that shame and bad temper do not necessarily interfere with the normal appetite of man.

“You’re rather a cad, you know, Ambry,” said the slim boy who faced his friend at the little table by the fire. “You’ve bungled the thing from the very first, telling me the story as one of Dick’s silly messes, and then letting out names and dates—you and Anie——”

“Oh, shut up, will you? Don’t nag at a fellow now. I had to talk to somebody. How was I to know you were so thick there? How was I to know that your mother and Lady Cassock are half-sisters? I met her at the Lynes, away from all her people. Of course, each knew who the other was, connexions and all that, but we had a pretty bad case while it lasted——”

“Six weeks would cover your part, wouldn’t it?” interjected Varian.

“And we were not talking of family trees,” went on Ambry, without taking any notice of him. “For me, she dropped from nowhere into my arms the day

she came sidling, with that silly, little, uncertain gait of hers—— ”

“ Don’t ! ” put in Varian angrily.

“ I’ve got to tell you about it, haven’t I ? ” retorted Ambry. “ You know how she walks, characteristic enough, I suppose, but deuced unsteady. Well, she came into that pokey, green, drawing-room at the Lynes, and no one else was down, and we got talking, and that’s the way it all started. She went mad, and I suppose I did, too. Of course, I did. I completely lost my head. I must have been insane to meet her at that confounded German governess’s. Lord ! I’d give a good deal to be well out of it. Why can’t she drop me ? I’ve treated her like a beast. I’m willing to admit it—— ”

“ Oh, it’s an easy admission for the beast to make, but she carries your claw marks. Good God, Ambry, how can you sit down under it ? ”

The slim boy pushed back his chair and went over to the piano, keeping his back to his friend. Varian Edmonton’s smooth young face had that long, charming, oval form you see in some of Van Dyck’s portraits of adolescents, that one of Thomas Wharton, for instance. Here were the same large, clear eyes, set well apart under the broad brow, the straight, short nose, with sensitive nostrils, the well-cut, generous lips, the upper one a trifle short. The whole presented an engaging ensemble, gave an instant impression of courage, of frankness, of chivalrous, clear purpose.

Ambry fidgeted about the room, rang the bell for the man to remove the breakfast things, and when they were alone again broke out with :

"Why do I sit down under it? How the devil can I do anything else?"

"Marry her, hang it, Ambry. You know that as well as I do. Try to clean up your dirty work, at least."

"Oh, it isn't so bad as all that. I—I'll have to crawl, I suppose, but she'll get over it when she really understands."

"Who's going to make her—you? From what you've told me of that letter this morning, I can see that you've lied and shuffled and squirmed a bit, but you haven't been frank. You haven't faced it. You're torturing the poor child. What she sees in you, Lord knows. You can't run straight——"

"Look here, cut it, Varian. Why must you preach? I'm no worse than the rest of us—well, not you, perhaps. You can't seem to understand a chap losing his head about a girl, and then—getting over it."

"Getting over it, yes, after you're tired of seeing her down beside you in the mud. Oh, you can pull yourself out of it, and you do. None of it sticks to *you*."

Ambry kicked a chair about to face the fire, chose a cigarette from the big silver box, but held it unlighted between his lips while he laid an arm around Varian's shoulders and looked him in the eye. There was a charm in the gesture, a rather intense attraction in the tall, well-knit body trained to the last inch, perfectly sane and healthy, in the fair, florid face with a boyish freshness in the clear eyes, in the white teeth, in the vigorous hair, to all of which Varian, nervous and introspective, found he was, to his disgust, by no means insensible.

He jerked his shoulder, as a sort of protest to himself, but Ambry held on to him with that strong, firm hand, bending his high head to catch the boy's indignant look.

"It's not so bad as you think. I swear it, Varian. There isn't any mud to stick. I've been frightfully careful. Absolutely not a soul knows. Fräulein would cut herself up in small pieces for Anie, and I have met her there only—twice, yes, twice. First, when she came up to town from the Lynes——"

"You must have got awfully thick in three days. When was it?"

"Yes, we did. There's something about her. In the beginning, something pathetic. You're so infernally sorry for her. Why, the Lord only knows. She's like a bird some fool has hit with a stone. You take her up in your hands, and—then you can't drop her. She clutches you with those little reeds of fingers. You can't get the look in her big eyes out of your head. But you get tired of it—damned tired of it. I tell you, Varian—. No, hold still; let me finish. Lord knows I don't want to whitewash myself, but I tell you she can't hold you. She can't hold me. She makes me ugly. She eats you up—the same eternal thing. A fellow can't play the game as she wants it. She's a bundle of nerves, flying up over the housetops, while you're standing in Piccadilly. Well, I prefer Piccadilly. I'm over it now. I confess I lost my head at her first sweetness—she's such a little sidling, big-eyed thing—but I've shaken down, and she won't or can't. There you have the whole thing. I tell you, Varian, if I married her, I'd be a beast to her. So what's the use?

If she still went on—being fond of me, I think I'd have it in me to break her neck."

Ambry withdrew his arm and lighted his cigarette with a care that bespoke a desire to catch his breath.

"You're low all through," announced Varian, "and the only good thing about it is that you know it. But Anie! I simply can't believe it. I went down to their place for all my holidays when mother was in Rome. Anie is only two years younger than I am. She was always a delicate little kiddie. I used to read to her under that cedar. You don't know Crops, do you? They haven't the money to keep it up, but it has wonderful gardens, simply because they can't pay enough men to trim them and clip them out of all recognition; a tangled, wild place, almost too sweet, with thickets of honeysuckle and jasmine. She always wore little white frocks, with that hair of hers tumbling down to her waist. One day I read the 'Ancient Mariner' to her. I'll never forget it. She grew the most beautiful pink with excitement, and when I had finished the colour all faded away and she threw herself on me, crying in floods. Her tears got all over the book, and my hands caught in her hair. It hung down all around in a cloud. I'll never forget it. . . . And a child like that to break her heart for you! She's the most delicate, the most sensitive——"

"She's everything you say," put in Ambry, "and there's where the trouble is. She's too fine for me. She wouldn't be able to breathe in my world at all, and I choke in hers. Besides, it irritates me. She irritates me. She annoys me. She tires me. My fault entirely for being a thick-skinned beast, but the fact remains.

What in heaven's name am I to do? I've lied to her, and she's found me out, and yet she can write to me like this and make herself sick. Good Lord, what a world!"

Ambry Nunholme betook himself to the window and blew a coil of smoke over the flower-box into the quiet, sunny air.

Lady Nunholme, left a widow with one boy, the place at Appleton, and an income that would be the better for nursing, settled the matter in a few years, when Ambry was at Eton, by a second marriage with an elderly and amiable individual, a personage in the world of banks and mines. Mr. Goodrich-Dow and Lady Nunholme were familiar figures every season at those swollen Continental villages where you take the waters for Lord knows what. At other times they opened a big, dull house not too far off Berkeley Square. Here Ambry was instructed to call certain rooms his own, wherein he changed occasionally when he was dining with his mother and her agreeable, semi-paternal consort, but for the actual purposes of life he kept the flat in Wilton Place.

It was not till his last term at Oxford that he fell in with Varian Edmonton, his junior by some three years. Ambry, by no means a dunce, was capable of having his ambition played upon by a rather youngish tutor whom he happened to fancy. The brilliant-looking lad, with his high head and the charm of manner he could exercise when he saw fit, made himself uncommonly interesting to this tutor, Johnstone-Ford, who enjoyed a certain amount of small academic fame, working early and late with his chosen flock, whipping their pride,

beating up their student temper. Generous, eager, unsparing, he, more often than not, lighted up in these youngsters the sacred flame of enthusiasm. His men stood well in the lists, and the harrying of their minds, the grapple with diverse, sometimes subtle temperaments, interested Ford far more than the weighty scientific memoirs he forced himself to labour at from time to time, drawing them reluctantly enough from their dusty receptacles. How much better to lick into shape the living organism, with the clear blood showing in the fresh young faces, the tall athletic bodies tingling from exercise, coming up the towing-path by the meadows in the twilight, towel over shoulder, pipe in mouth.

As one of Ford's nurslings, Ambry met Varian, taking a warm liking to the slim, studious lad, younger than himself in years, but much older by virtue of a fine mind, just now in the ferment of self-discovery, of a nicely-balanced moral nature, and a temperament chilly enough to be its own stopcock. Ambry, for his part, with his extraordinary good looks, his wild spirits, and a certain very lovable, if fitful modesty in regard to his own attainments, fascinated Varian Edmonton, who found in him a vigorous, rough-and-ready correction for the nervous boredom that frequently beset him.

Losing his father at an early age, Varian had been brought up by his delicate, consumptive mother, hidden away in the little, old, ivy-choked, Dorset manor house. He had been a whimsical child, left very much to himself, save for regular lessons with the rosy-cheeked young Scotchwoman who helped to teach the rectory brood, and for his Latin with the vicar. Varian will

remember as long as he lives the look, the atmosphere, of certain low rooms in the old house. How, in the spring, when the small-paned windows were set open, the light would weave a wavering pattern on the parquetry floor, glancing and gleaming and bowing over the big nailheads that held the morsels of wood together in one of the simpler designs of seventeenth-century taste in such matters. How his mother's little boudoir was hung with a clear-coloured French paper, buff, striped with pale violet. How its long window opened straight on the garden path, bordered with huge, spreading begonias, orange-dappled, crimson-dappled, or freckled like a ripe apricot. How, on sunny mornings, there seemed to be a mysterious bloom, a sort of downiness, on the ancient mellow bricks of the garden walls. How . . . But he rarely went there now. The place was let to cousins. Vagrant thoughts of it occasionally stirred a nostalgic *malaise* in Varian, a vague, irrational, reluctant regret for the long-past childhood that had not been a conspicuously happy one. During his years at Eton the house was closed, his mother staying in Rome with some connexions of her Italian father—people of wealth and consideration who were charmed with the fair, delicate, intelligent woman. Lady Cassock, her elder half-sister on her English mother's side, with her two girls, Anie and Estelle, her big house in Belgrave Square, and the place at Crops, took on the boy for his holidays, growing fond of him in her careless way, principally because he was good-looking, with little chilly airs that took her fancy.

After Ambry and Varian went down from the University, they saw little of each other until a year before

this council in the Wilton Place flat. Ambry, while playing with the idea of diplomacy, a career for which he was singularly unsuited, occupied the almost honorary billet of secretary to a large, imposing individual of enormous interests and atrophied personality, an obliged friend of Mr. Goodrich-Dow. Varian, in modest lodgings just around the corner from Eccleston Square, cultivated a *gauche* little muse in the intervals of working for a vast encyclopædic dictionary of art and artists, that a publishing firm of the new world-wide, wide-awake variety had undertaken with immense gusto and fatiguing fanfare of advertisement.

Ambry turned away from the window to reach impatiently across the table for another cigarette.

"Well, what am I to do? We can't stick here all the morning, staring at each other. Writing is no good, for she simply *won't* understand. Varian—if you'd only help a fellow——"

"I've told you what you ought in decency to do, and you fly out and swear you won't."

"Go to that infernal Detmold's——"

"Exactly. You went there gladly enough once, didn't you? Anie will drag herself out of bed to be there to-day at two. Are you going to let her wait after that letter? Where is the place?"

"Gordon Square."

"Go—go—go, and get over with it. Look as you are looking at me now, and she'll understand. That it should be little Anie!"

"Oh, don't rub it in so. Good Lord, I wish I were out of it! I'm sorry for her——"

"Don't whine. You've given her a blow just as

brutal as if you had struck her in the face. Make her understand——”

“But I can’t!” exclaimed the desperate Ambry. “Haven’t I told you I’ve tried? For the last two weeks I’ve neglected her, broken engagements, lied to her, said I was going to Appleton, stayed and talked to her sister at Hurlingham—quite a different kind of girl, Estelle, tall and well set up. She had a ripping sort of hat on with wheat ears all over it——”

“Drop Estelle for heaven’s sake. What has she got to do with it?” inquired Varian savagely.

“As I am trying to tell you, seeing Anie won’t help matters at all. When she sees me—oh, well, I feel like a cad saying it, but she’s so fond of me, she simply doesn’t see the real me at all. She looks at you so with those eyes of hers, twiddling her little fingers on your arm, that, in spite of it all, you try to play up to what she expects—I don’t say she isn’t sweet—so you funk what you were going to say, and the whole deuced business is still hanging around your neck, choking every bit of pleasure in life out of you. I can’t face it again. What’s the use? I’m not lying to you. Can’t you see it only makes it harder for her? . . . It’s eleven o’clock now, by Jove, and I must look in on my old man before twelve. Will you lunch with me?”

“No!”

Ambry got between the door and Varian who had picked up his hat and stick.

“One minute, I say,” pleaded Ambry.

Varian stopped, a little pale. “I don’t think I want to talk about it any more. You shuffle so unspeakably. Why did you tell me all this? What have you in the

back of your mind that concerns me? Why am I dragged in at all?"

Ambry ran his hands desperately over his sleek head.

"You'll shriek, I suppose. Varian, you meet her. You go to Gordon Square. You know us both. She'll believe you when you tell her I'm no good."

"You must be mad," retorted Varian. "She'd very properly refuse to see me."

"Good heavens, if you only would go! It could be managed perfectly. You ask for Fräulein Detmold, and the slavey takes you up to the sitting-room. You don't give your name or card. The girl has been told a young gentleman is expected. You probably won't lay eyes on anyone but Anie."

Varian was looking straight at Ambry, but he did not see him. He was gazing at the shadowy figure of a little girl in a white frock, a cloud of hair shading her soft eyes, who appeared to come sidling up to Ambry, her pretty head on a level with his elbow, her tiny, reedlike fingers groping timidly and uncertainly for his unconscious hand. But surely there was something else there too? Something that resolved itself into two, greyish, smokelike figures, floating in an enveloping atmosphere of their own. What tricks the morning sun could play with overstrained eyes, filtering in through the striped awning, over the flowers in the window-box, deepening the brownish gold shadows that hung about the old-fashioned desk with the rows of books atop! Somewhere in these shadows, appearing and disappearing, darkening and brightening to Varian's astonished gaze, hover these smokelike, greyish figures, one on either side of the childish Anie, like mysterious supporters on

some shield of arms. One seems to be a woman, fair and simple and young, and the colours she wears are blue and white and gold, melting and mingling, darkening and brightening, wrapping her about as with an airy, unsubstantial cloud-mantle. The man, her companion, tall and slim and dark and fine, in that curious, close-fitting costume, outlined in diamond shapes, appears to be strangely armed with a kind of sword or wooden lathe. . . . Why—Varian shut his eyes a moment.

“Whisky?” asked Ambry, putting a glass in his hand. “What on earth’s the matter with you? Do your eyes hurt?”

“Oh, no; at least not more than usual. It is that confounded encyclopædia. Take this whisky, will you? I never drink before lunch.”

Ambry miserably set the glass on the table beside the siphon and the big silver cigarette box. He was afraid to hint Gordon Square again, and yet he was dimly conscious that in the last few moments something had occurred to change Varian’s attitude, to make him willing to see Anie. Lord, if he only would!

“What’s the number?” demanded Varian, without looking at him.

“Forty-one,” replied Ambry eagerly, fixing Varian with that boyish, troubled, impelling gaze that had served him so excellently in previous crises of his sentimental career. “If you go, I shall never forget it as long as I live. I shall stick here all day waiting for you.”

“Oh, don’t wait, I may not come back. I must do it my own way. I don’t promise to go at all, but, if

I do, it certainly won't be on your account, but on hers."

"Of course, dear old chap. But couldn't you send me a wire?"

"No. This isn't a Stock Exchange affair. You are impossible. You set my teeth on edge."

"I know it," said Ambry disarmingly.

"Forty-one," repeated Varian, pulling open the door quickly, as Ambry's servant knocked, carrying his master's hat and stick.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Varian reached the street, he hailed a passing taxi in order to avoid seeing Ambry again should he follow him out. He had mechanically given his own address, but before they had crossed Ebury Street, he shouted Gordon Square through the speaking-tube, feeling that to go and look at the outside of the house, to fix it in his mind as a cemented brick entity, would make it more possible for him to present himself, some three hours later at this door, so infamously differentiated, so damnably set apart from its fellows, the innocent constructions of a row, by the forty-and-one marked under its fanlight.

The morning was already too broken into to serve for working purposes, and he was too nervously conscious of a certain exaltation in himself to make it possible to master his impatience in the tranquil surroundings of his familiar quiet room, with his paper slips, his stands and tables of reference books—the paraphernalia of a studious and orderly, if as yet boyishly self-conscious mind. At this moment he had never felt less representatively studious and orderly, less like himself in his everyday habit. His heart was pounding, and his eyes hurt. He was beginning to recall, in a gush of tenderness, the Anie he knew best, the child, and the thin young girl, just letting down her dresses and knotting up her hair—the sensitive, timid, and imaginative Anie, to whom, during their last holiday together at Crops before he went up to Oxford, he had opened

his boy's heart, with all its plans, its ambitions, and its proud little secrets. With what sweetness and charm she had thrilled to all he told her, longing to be a boy and to go to Oxford with him, begging him to write to her. He had, and she had answered, but his work absorbed him more and more, and Anie was presently being unblushingly exhibited (holding her eyes for shame one might suppose), by an anxious and worldly mother from one end of London to the other. . . . Now Estelle had come on, and he supposed Lady Cassock to be bending her energies in that direction, desperately nerved to a campaign of triumph by what she would call the miserable failure of her elder daughter. That poor child, left to herself, innocent, caressing, vague, had clutched at Ambry, with all her soul in her eyes, and that radiant, healthy, and beautiful person was at this very moment engaged in shaking her off. No, not Ambry, but Varian himself, doing his filthy work for him. By Jove!—

Varian had his hand on the speaking-tube, "Wilton Place" forming on his lips. Then he remembered the extraordinary impression he had received in Ambry's rooms that very morning—the trick of light that had seemed to project her shadowy little figure before him. No, he must do it. His hands were those of friendship. She would take it from him that Ambry must never touch her again.

The taxi snorted its way into the green harbour of the square, trailed by a bluish fume of petrol.

"Where to, sir?"

"Drive around slowly, will you? I simply wish to make sure of a number."

So around they went, Varian perceiving that this neighborhood was manifestly a brooding mother to the international boarding-house. One after another they affronted his eye, with their becurtained and belooped windows, their shining brass bells and knockers, their fallacious air of welcoming brightness. Oh, poor Anie! Surely never here could her desperate little romance have flowered!

“Thirty-eight—thirty-nine—forty——”

Varian leaned forward to make quite sure. No, thank heaven, forty-one was not a boarding-house. Forty-one stood out from its smartened fellows by reason of its sober, self-respecting dinginess, its dull paint, its shrouded and shuttered windows. Here were discreet lodgments evidently, quiet and respectable—exactly the refuge for an elderly spinster who had put by a little money. It would be sufficiently cool and dim within, Varian thought, imaginatively sure of the long, high, narrow room into which he would presently be shown.

He dismissed the taxi, striking out at random along a dull, empty, sunny street, feeling that he could arrange his thoughts better, master a certain rising excitement, were he on his legs. He would walk for an hour, lunch somewhere, vagrantly, simply, in half an hour, and present himself in Gordon Square on the stroke of two. He found himself wondering, with a half-amused, half-angry soreness at the golden youth's habitual inconsequence, whether Ambry had been equally prompt in those two acknowledged meetings in this house. . . . What infamy! He mustn't think of it in that way. He must remember Anie. She was his clue of thread in this amazing maze.

The street he followed grew gradually noisier and narrower, degenerating at last into a mere alley. You picked your way between dogs and children—poor, screaming pigmies, tousled and imperfectly clothed, who fought one another with sticks, with empty tins, with bones wrested from the howling dogs.

Varian, becoming suddenly aware of this pandemonium breaking in on his uneasy thoughts, turned off in the direction of Oxford Street, the tops of the peopled buses, the waving banners of the sandwichmen, the brilliant and fantastic shop advertisements, together with a bellowing boom of traffic, announcing the proximity of that energetic thoroughfare. Before he reached it, however, he had an odd little experience that sent his mind back on the track of the unknown, back to the tortuous, lost paths of the subconscious on which his hesitating feet had been set for an instant that morning. He had called it a trick of light to himself, shuffling thus with his better judgment, knowing quite well all the time that what he had seen—the vision of Anie as a child, with those two cloudy guardian figures—was not to be explained by any ordinary scientific formula.

Here, in this eddy of the London current, where Berners Street sets strongly into Oxford Street, Varian stopped to light a cigarette—a simple enough performance, even in the wind, if you happen to have a match, but well-nigh impossible without that tiny yellow or blue-tipped, wooden or waxen wand of civilization. The cigarette between his lips, gloves and stick grasped in one hand, while the other furiously searched the network of pockets the modern man bears upon his person,

Varian was an object of sympathy to any fellow-devotee, whether he were the passing individual whom you might meet any day at the club, or this sandwichman who smilingly regarded him, his board propped up against a railing, at the moment of his noontime rest. Drawing luxuriously upon his pipe, he held out on the palm of too clean, too well-shaped a hand to be quite in character, the tiny, magic box of vestas.

Varian's glance first caught the hand and its offering, then took in with the frank, wide-open stare of curiosity the grotesque figure to which they belonged—the tall, thin, supple body, draped in who can describe what absurdity of bath-towelling, the thin, dark face, with the kind, weary eyes, surmounted by the Turkish fez, the sign of the great new bath establishment thus screaming its birth across half London.

“Thank you so much,” said Varian, as, striking a light, he returned the box to its owner.

He lingered a moment, uncommonly attracted by something in the demeanour of the towel man. . . . Why, he seemed to know him. It couldn't be some chap who—? Oh, no, they never got quite to that. . . . But where had he seen him, or rather what did he recall? . . . Varian reddened to find himself at gaze in front of the man, and walked on, with a salute for his courtesy. . . . It was the extraordinary length and slimness of the fellow—ah, he had it. He seemed to see him in tights, barred and disked and ringed and glittering like a snake. . . . By Jove, the figure supporting that vision of Anie! Oh, this was too much! He was dreaming resemblances—everything to-day seemed caught in the web of his own particular prob-

lems. It was because he had had no lunch. He needed a drink.

Pulling out his watch to see how much time he could allow himself, Varian made his way to a small chop-house in the vicinity, securing to himself, with some difficulty, a microscopic table half-hidden behind the door, for at this hour the place was filled with young clerks, lunching voraciously and at extreme speed. The noise of voices, of dishes, of hurried steps up and down the narrow gangways, the confusion that seemed to hang as something palpable in the air, mingled with the hearty, heady British odour of hot roast, assaulted Varian's senses like a barbaric army. Oddly enough, what would have fatigued and enraged his almost feminine fastidiousness at a more normal moment now distracted and steadied him. He was glad to feel himself as much a part of these healthy, feeding youngsters as his retired seat at his little table could make him.

With intense relief, while waiting for his whisky and grilled chop, he slid away from 41 Gordon Square, and its torturing implications, regarding with a facile amusement born of relaxed nerves the young man with the magenta tie and the enormous striped cuffs who was chaffing the stout, tired waitress. But Varian's respite was short; the place emptied itself as the time wore on toward two. A redoubled clatter announced the clearing of the tables. Before they would be set again for tea, he whimsically mused, this ordeal of his would be over. Would his inner pity and soreness be soothed and stroked and cooled by anything that poor Anie could give him? . . . How was he to carry on his

life, how could he work with this strange inversion of all his customary thoughts and feelings? . . . Anie—Anie. If he didn't love her, what did it mean? What wand had touched him, unsealing this hidden fountain that was flooding all his being with waters not yet blessedly crystal-pure and sweet, but turbid and heated and brackish? . . . That fellow who had given him the match—there was something odd there, something in the man's look, in the touch of his hand. "Good Lord, what a day to live through!" groaned Varian to himself, paying for his chop and his drink and for the box of matches that the stout, flushed, tired waitress had procured for him.

Ten minutes later he ran up the whitened steps of No. 41, and rang the bell. He set his teeth nervously; he was quite young, and these preliminaries were the devil. When he saw her, the magic carpet, he knew, would unroll between them upon which their feet could rest in mutual confidence. But the door was opening. Ambrey's slavey turned out to be a neat German maid who stood back in the box of a lobby for him to pass her into the hall that was clean and damply cool with its paving of black-and-white squares. The stairs, curving slightly in not a bad line, were furnished with a slender, mahogany handrail. Up the wall to your right as you mounted was hung a suite of small wood-engravings in modest, black frames, representing eighteenth-century views of the palaces and gardens of Potsdam and Sans-Souci.

The maid knocked at a door at the head of the stairs, and then disappeared down the passage. Varian waited an instant, but on hearing nothing from within,

opened the door and entered the room. It was empty. He was conscious at once of a faintish odour of the encaustic preparation with which the wooden floor had been rubbed, mingled with a certain disconcerting *mélange* of lavender and vanilla—doubtless some strange old sachet of the ancient maiden Detmold. The room was high and long, narrow and dim as he had foreseen. From the door you faced a flat, imitation black marble mantelpiece, with an old-fashioned firescreen of worked woollen tapestry that had been thrust back into the blank aperture formed by the empty grate. The large, old mirror above, sparsely bound in lifeless gilt, seemed fitted to reflect in its tarnished glass only the worn, the sad, the hopeless, the disillusioned. It held no answering gleams for roses or young love. . . .

But Anie? He waited. No sound in all the silent house. Would she come through that door from the hall? Where was she waiting? Could the maid have said that she did not recognize the young gentleman? Varian turned cold, and then prickingly hot, swinging around on his heel to front the large folding-doors, opposite the windows, that had been pulled back just far enough to admit the childish figure of Anie, with her little, white face, the thick hair tumbled on the white brow—face and brow whiter, the great eyes larger and wilder and deeper by reason of the tight black riding-habit that she wore.

“Ah-h,” broke from her in a strained little catching whisper, as their gaze hung together across the quiet room.

Varian fought down a nervous spasm that threatened

to interfere with his voice, laid his hat and stick on a table, and went toward her, walking quickly.

"Sit down here on the sofa, won't you, Anie?"

She followed him to it passively, feet dragging, the little figure shrinking into itself. She began to speak at once, without looking at him.

"Of course you have seen Ambry. How could you be here, if you hadn't? He has told you about me? He knows you—but I never knew." She made a pause to catch her breath. Varian felt the edge of the sofa with his hands. The voice trailed on.

"He cannot come to-day? He—he isn't—ill, is he?" Then she looked at him. Spurred by the miserable longing in her face, Varian plunged.

"He cannot come to-day. He never will come again."

The hideous question sprang up in her poor, drowned eyes.

"Dead?"

"No, no, good heavens, no! You misunderstand me. He is in excellent health. He is at this very moment in Wilton Place, not at Appleton, as he told you he would be. He gave me to understand that he had lied to you repeatedly, that he had broken engagements, that he was absolutely not to be depended upon——"

"Yes, yes, yes, that is true." She turned from him, so as to hide her face. Varian went on.

"I didn't come here to call him the miserable hound that he is—no, wait, hear me out—Anie! You must believe that whatever comes of this day, I have tried to do what seems to be my plain duty to you, to you, my little, old pal of those days at Crops."

No answer. He forced himself to go on.

"I knew Ambry at Oxford. He went down before I did, but we ran across each other last year. He has a personality that—well, you are attracted. I've never met his people, nor he mine. He did not know till to-day that mother and Aunt Etta are sisters. He never dreamed that we were friends. I met him this morning at his rooms in answer to a wire. He was greatly upset. He had had a letter——"

Anie interrupted him.

"I know. It was mine. When I wrote it, Varian, last night, all alone in the house, I felt so ill. I wished to be ill. Was it so weak, so childish, was I without pride to want to see him once more? Oh, I can tell it to you. I knew that he was tired of me, that he wished to get away. But there was just one chance that I might be mistaken, and that if we met here, where it is so quiet and still, and where time seems to run backward—oh, I can't tell you what I hoped. He came here when he said he loved me—for he did love me for those few weeks." Varian winced at her tone.

"You met him here—often?"

"Only twice, oh, for but half an hour, but how each minute sang! We sat here on this sofa. We did not even touch each other. He would not, he said, because I was here alone. But I was alone at the Lynes, and he kissed me then. Perhaps I was beginning to tire him——"

"Don't speak of it in that way," broke out Varian. "It drives me wild. To tire him! Good Lord!"

"You said yourself that he has a personality that attracts. There must be so many who are charmed with

him. Is it odd that certain—*exigeantes* are pushed aside?" She had spoken calmly enough, but now her voice rose slightly and her fingers twisted together in her lap.

"Varian, there is something else. He has met Estelle. She admires him. She speaks about him. Mamma has noticed it. If he comes to the house, if I must see and talk to him, *en famille*, I shall lose control of myself. I know it, Varian. Is it not too much to expect of me? Would he be so brutal as that? I could not! I could not!"

"Leave all that to me," answered Varian grimly. "He has put himself in my hands to a certain extent. For your sake, not for his, I came here to-day.—There was something queer about that, too. I'll explain it to you some time, but not now. Imagine my disgust, and my rage at him, when, after telling me your story and his as something that concerned Dick Halsey, he suddenly let slip your name, and with it the whole unhappy business! Anie, those long mornings at Crops came over me in a flood. My little pal had put her heart in such a pair of hands! There he sat, with your letter, calmly telling me——"

"Yes, what did he say?" broke in Anie eagerly. "Do you remember it word for word? If I could hear it, not from his lips, but from yours, because you are so different, it might burn away this horrible spot of decay in my heart that makes me love him. If you tell me, Varian, I don't think I shall mind the pain so.—O Ambry, Ambry, what have you done to me?"

Varian, white as the girl, put an unsteady arm about the thin, shaking young shoulders.

"Good God, what a beast! He takes you up, and tries to break you, and then tires of the sport. Listen to me. Whatever he felt for you has gone out, flickered out, dried up, choked by his selfishness. You are so far above and beyond him—your goodness, your gentleness—he says so himself, that he can't keep up. He'll never see you again, if he can help it. There you have him in his simple brutality."

The convulsive sobs had ceased. She lay against him exhausted.

"Oh, it hurts so! How can I tell you? What will you think of me, if I say that the thought of him—his eyes, his hands, his hair, the way he walks, the sound of his voice——"

She lifted herself and drew away from Varian, pressing back against the sofa. "It stabs me so here, and here"—she pointed to her breast and to her head, "that I am sick, oh, sick with it." Her eyes miserably searched his for some relief. He could give her none. He looked at the floor. It was bare, with a small green rug in the centre, near the table. He smelt again the mixture of encaustic, of lavender, of vanilla.

"It's a hideous mess, you poor child," he took her small, cold hand in his. "But what can we do? The memory of him makes you suffer as if you had some horrible malady—and I am like a bungler with a knife, who can only torture you, but who cannot cut out the cancer. You are the only one who can do that. We must wait. I must think. You trust me, don't you?"

She nodded her head. "Oh, yes, yes."

He went on, half speaking to himself. "You haven't

a chance to fight for your life in Belgrave Square. Aunt Etta and Estelle, with their chatter of whom one must meet and whom one mustn't, would simply be your executioners. Oh, I remember Aunt Etta of old. She's as hard and polished as a piece of metal. You break yourself and your idealism upon that steel-like shell. You and I never made a breach there, Anie. She had enough of me that last holiday. She said I gave you notions. I tried to, I confess."

Anie barely lifted her heavy eyes, but the tears were over.

"You were the only friend I ever had. You will never know what it meant to me to have you come down to us. I was so wretched and fidgety. Once I took from mamma's desk the letter you sent, saying when you would leave school, and I wore it for days pinned inside my frock."

"Oh, what sweetness! Why did you never tell me?" He felt an angel troubling the hidden waters; he felt the nightmare oppression of the last few hours flowing and melting under the sweep of its wing.

"I would have been so ashamed to," she said.

Varian saw that, from very exhaustion, she had ceased for the moment to think of Ambry. She half lay upon the sofa, looking at the floor. As he sat beside her he noticed the relaxed, pathetic curve of her waist in the straitly-buttoned habit, the tiny wrists that protruded limply from the line of white cuff pinned into the black cloth sleeves. Ah, if she had come here to meet—him, instead of Ambry. How the dim room would have been rayed about with light, how the pale mirror would have gleamed with it! But now? He must think how best

to save this poor, racked, little Prisoner of Passion—to save her from herself. He went no further just then.

“Anie, would you go to mother?”

“Your mother? But I scarcely know her, Varian. She seems always to have been in Rome. I thought the place at Layton-Deacon was let?”

“It is. We haven’t been in Dorset for five years. But since I have had rooms in Cambridge Street, and mother has been so much better, she has taken a house at Wimbledon. It belongs to Digby Colfax, my old guardian, and he lets us have it for a song. It’s old and square and has a good garden and shrubbery. Aunt Etta must have told you, but you have forgotten. Since you came out, we poor relations have had no glimpses of this young lady—” He was working for the smile that he did not succeed in drawing to the red, tremulous lips.

“Since I came out! I shudder at the recollection. My ‘hideous failure’ in mamma’s eyes is what has saved me. Estelle is making up for that. Yes, I do seem to remember something about Aunt Gita and Wimbledon. But what is your plan, Varian?”

“Oh, simply unformed and vague as yet, but the first thing to do is to get you away from Belgrave Square. Mother is alone, except for Miss Peet-Byng, a dear old thing who looks out for her, and she would jump at the idea of having you with her. Naturally, she would never dream of suggesting it, fancying you quite gay and happy. Aunt Etta always overshadowed and overpowered her, and, in her heart, I am sure she goes in terror of her. Poor *petite maman*! We must,

however, manage things through her. It will be plausible, and only decent, for her to come in to see Aunt Etta. I will let you know the day. She is to meet you and to find you shockingly white. You will have been refusing to go to parties, and Aunt Etta will be consequently enraged. Mother will beg you to run down to her for a few weeks, and Aunt Etta will be only too relieved to pack you off, disliking, as you know she always inhumanly did, all languor and paleness. Then mother will carry you away to a big, cool, shadowy, white room I know of, and you will have time to catch that poor, little, bruised breath of yours. Will you care if I run down often?"

Anie turned her face full to his. "Will I care?" she echoed. "I must clutch at you, Varian, if I am ever to belong to myself again. You have given me here, to-day, by something in your eyes and in your voice, the courage to go on living, even with this hideous black hole in my heart in which I seem always to see Ambry's face—to see him, to hear him, to feel him." The poor child trembled all over, and put her hands over her disfigured face.

"But you *do* wish to forget—the face and the memories," urged Varian unsteadily.

"Oh, yes, yes. It hurts too much. Most girls would be too proud. But I am not. I'm beaten down. I should have lain where he dropped me, had it not been for you. You came and pulled me up." Quite simply she leaned over and kissed his cheek. The tears came in his eyes, and he let her see them. Then they both felt better.

"It must be horribly late," exclaimed Anie.

"Half-past three," answered Varian, looking at his watch. "Where are you supposed to be?"

"Oh, here, of course. There is no concealment about it. I told mamma I should lunch and stay a bit with Fräulein. I rode late on purpose. Dixon came for the horse and put me in a taxi."

"What will you do now? Who will get you a cab? We can't go out together."

"Yes, I know. Ambry said the same thing."

Varian ground his teeth at her innocent readiness to ruin her reputation, such an appanage still being, in our present state of society, of incalculable value to a marriageable maid.

"Fräulein sends for one," she went on. "It is quite simple. You have been so good to me. I shall sleep to-night."

"By the way, Anie, I don't like this Fräulein Detmold's ways and manners. She ought to know better than you that what we are doing now is by no means—*convenable*, to put it mildly."

"I know. I know. But she is an old dear, and she loves me. She is intensely romantic."

"Thank God this is the last time you will make use of her house in this particular fashion. Let me think. This is Thursday. I will write to mother at once. She will have the letter Friday morning, and will come to town in the afternoon. Do you know if Aunt Etta is dining out?"

"One can always catch her at six. She says she must have at least an hour in which to contract before beginning to dress or Marcelle could never hook her up. Mamma is getting so stout. Then six to-morrow. Per-

haps Aunt Gita will take me down with her at once. It is such a little run, and it would be so beautiful in the dusk. Would you perhaps come on Saturday?"

Heavens, how sweet she was! Varian shook himself mentally, and took up his hat and stick.

"Count on me," he said, turning to the door. "I let myself out, eh?" She nodded, such a babyish figure in her tight habit, standing alone in the centre of the strange, unfamiliar room.

So he thought as he hailed a taxi from the doorstep, plunging into it in order to be removed as quickly as possible from the, to him, haunted neighbourhood of Gordon Square.

In the relaxation of his spirits, to make a little fête for himself, as you give a strawberry-treat to a particularly good child, Varian directed the cab to the entrance to St. Martin's Lane. Up the alley, to the left, in a neat shop that smells of ancient, dampish paper, he was courteously received and intelligently ministered to. After an agreeable chat with the mild spectacled Guardian of the Precinct, Varian emerged carrying two more than fair-sized volumes in the crook of his left arm. He was still boyish enough to be reluctant to entrust them for delivery to the small, buttoned minion of the establishment, who was at that moment having his tea from a massive white china mug, boy and mug and bread and butter discreetly screened by a large, dismantled packing-box throning it in the distant gloom. One book was a rather rare one, at least rare with all the plates—a history of the ancient and honourable Italian comedy, the *Commedia dell' Arte*—from its cloudy birth at a Dionysiac festival was it?

to its decay at the end of the eighteenth century, burning out with so much else that was full of distinction, charming, gay, fragile, and frivolous. The other was a study, in Italian, of an obscure Lombard painter about whom it was now becoming more and more the fashion to be knowing. And Varian's encyclopædic editor demanded, above all things, that his young men should be that.

In Trafalgar Square Varian attached himself to the fleeting rear of a Victoria bus that presently deposited him in the full flood of the station yard, with the current setting strongly toward Suburbia. Breasting the flow, with his books clasped to his breast, Varian succeeded in reaching the comparative calm of the Wilton Road. Soon the waving, rich green tops of those tall forest trees in Eccleston Square, beckoning to him in the light, gold-dripping air of afternoon, proclaimed an oasis in the far-stretching, monotonous London desert.

Around the corner, in Cambridge Street, quiet, modest, and well-swept, were his lodgings, his first independent ones, of which he was immensely proud, concealing as best he might those fatigued airs common to the domesticated householder. This afternoon he ran up the stairs, his mind full of the letter he was mentally writing to his mother. As he did so, the little maid-of-all-work sprang out upon him on the landing, as though she had been suddenly released from a box at the end of a bit of elastic, and hissed in his ear:

"The young gentleman's been waitin' for most an hour."

"Oh, confound him," said Varian to himself, and "Oh, has he, Susy?" to the little maid.

Ambry, stretched out in the long, cane chair, prodding aimlessly at a rug with his stick, pulled himself up at sight of Varian. The latter deposited his books carefully on the writing-table, making a place for them by moving an untidy nest of papers, before he permitted himself to notice the impatient "Well?" that sprang to his companion's eyes and lips. Then he merely looked at him.

"Good heavens, do speak to a fellow!" bursts out Ambry. "I've been kicking my heels in this beastly room for the last two hours, and now you saunter in, as if you'd been buying books all the afternoon. Is it possible that you didn't see her after all? Is the whole awful business to be gone into again?"

"You simply make me sick," retorts Varian. "Anyone would suppose you were the one who was being hounded. Let me tell you this, and then let us consider the matter absolutely closed. Anie knows your frankly brutal attitude in regard to herself, and is strongly desirous of not laying eyes on you again. In order to simplify matters, and because she is really ill, she is leaving town at once. I may as well tell you that she is going down to my mother's at Wimbledon."

Varian delivered this announcement in a perfectly unemotional tone, and then with his hands in his pockets minutely regarded a large and to him nauseatingly familiar engraving of *The Triumph of Chastity*.

But Ambry was not to be put off by anything so obvious as this.

"Dear old chap, look at me for a moment, won't you? I know I'm an unspeakable cad, I see it now, but—. Because you've helped me out of this awful

mess—don't think I don't know it's all the fault of my confounded imprudence—no, that's not the word, but you understand what I mean—because you've saved me and saved Anie, too—. Don't fly up. I must call her something. Well, because of that, old chap, you can't turn a fellow down and out. Look here, Varian, we've known each other too long for that."

Ambry was right. Very few people could resist the charm of his engaging personality, supported so admirably as it was by a physique intensely supple, intensely virile, and Varian, hypersensitive to every æsthetic appeal, was not one of the few. So a hand came, however reluctantly, out of one of those pockets, and was eagerly grasped by Ambry, who, having gained his point, being freed at the same time from the haunting incubus of Gordon Square, was more than ready to act promptly on his young friend's weary "Oh, get out now, will you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE house at Wimbledon, having been built with intelligence at a pleasing architectural period, was more than ever, at this debased moment, an agreeable abode. Old Mr. Colfax came of a family of distinguished collectors who had preserved the laudable habit of leaving the ugliest of their "pots," when they collected china, the "finest" of their chairs, sofas, and tables, when they collected furniture, and the most impeccably "pedigreed" of their canvases, when they collected pictures, to London and provincial museums. This had the happy result for their descendants that what remained in the old place really embellished and became a part of it, not too fine for honest household use, not so obviously rich and rare that you are dismayed to find yourself unconsciously seeking the small inscribed tablet, dear to officialdom, in order to check up the "period."

The large, square, admirably proportioned rooms bear distinct marks of the race that had produced them, that had wrapped them in warm, softened tones, that had hung that Raeburn just where the blur of powdered hair, the fine hands crossed on the white silk lap, would count for the most; that had placed each delicate ornament, each faintly flowered Aubusson carpet, in a spot of all others dictated by right taste.

Mrs. Edmonton, though not herself of the family, was here perfectly in the picture, sitting in her cus-

tomary low chair by the long window that serves as an entrance to the garden, her small, black-slippered feet on a tufted hassock, her morning letters, littering the floor beside her, half-tumbling out of the gay Roman silk bag that held her intricate embroidery.

Varian was like his English father; this gentle, fatigued face held no hint of him. Her dark eyes looked out at you with a pathetic, veiled brilliancy, set far apart under the high, not broad, brow where the black hair began to show thick filaments of white, streaming back into the high, loose knot of her chignon, like the pied markings on the plumes of certain birds. Her smile was still delicious, betraying the almost girlish nature that lurked under this disguising exterior of the delicate woman, no longer young, indolent, and a lover of the tranquil days of the South, where the warm hours of the sun melt into the scarcely less warm hours of the moon, where you follow the shadows from vine-hung pergola to dusky, tottering pavilion, that still keeps some bravery of plaster god and goddess, now sadly skinned and buffeted. Oh, the steamy, earthy scents of garden mould in the long hot afternoons!

With the love of all this in her Italian blood she cheerfully relinquishes her Roman home and, in order to be near her boy, settles herself in Digby Colfax's Georgian house, in this weeping English climate. For the little chap she had left at Eton, developing far from her all through his Oxford years, had become, in his young manhood, a more vital, more dominating, more stirring influence in her existence than she had ever dreamed could be possible, since that day, twenty years before, when, broken, wretched, inwardly bleeding, she

had watched her husband die. Now the new, rosy flame of reviving love played once more in her heart, darting in and out of what she had thought to be a heap of ashes, and Varian—Varian in his every engaging aspect of ambitious youth, with his lodgings in town, his little writings, his encyclopædic and terrifying editor—Varian became the darling preoccupation of his mother's life.

Now she smiled to feel the thickness of his letter, patting and turning it in her long fingers. The first lines caught her attention and she raced through it, letting sheet after sheet rustle down into her lap. So that poor, pretty Anie wanted to run away from unhappy love (as if one ever could!), and, in some fashion not clearly brought out, her boy was arranging her little affairs for her. Well, his mother would, of course, do as he wished, not without a pang, perhaps, for daily, more and more, she hugged to her soul her indolent tranquillity, sitting or lying softly with her embroidery, or her drawing-blocks, on which she would sometimes throw out bizarre decorative designs, infiltrations from Byzantine or Persian art to which she gave an odd, extremely personal *nuance*. Her delicate health was sufficient bar to neighbourly visiting, and after a year's residence she was safe enough from indiscriminate demands, seeking only at rare intervals those persons especially asked to come. Now her lazy mornings in her cool, shuttered rooms, her long, drowsing afternoons in the sweet, neglected gardens, under the beeches and cedars, were no longer to be quite inviolate. Childish Anie, with a love affair on her hands, was to become her housemate. They would have to begin acquaintance all anew. Why, she must be almost as old as Varian.

It seemed incredible. She remembered a little faded photograph that Varian had sent her during his last holiday at Crops. He and Anie were sitting close together on a garden bench, with a big book spread out on their knees. Estelle had "snapped" them, doing it badly, so that the negative blurred. Their young faces stared out at you from the dark, leafy background, white, rather startled, and confused. Anie looked scarcely pretty, with her disorderly hair and her thin, childish legs, but Varian's beauty came out even in this wretched little attempt. And his mother could never forget the pang that shot through her in looking at it: "Oh, my boy is becoming a man! I must go to him." But she did not, and where were those lost years? She could never make them up now.

She turned again to her letter. "So I am to catch Etta at six, and beg for the loan of Anie, who will have paved the way for what must seem to Etta my extraordinary proposal, by refusing parties and looking ill. I wonder if my life would have been very different if I had had a girl? They certainly seem to Etta to be merely so many attractive little scented packets to barter with. As I remember Estelle, she will be able to take care of herself, but poor, helpless Anie, drifting heaven knows where, clutches at Varian with her burnt fingers, and I am to supply the healing ointment."

She shrugged her thin shoulders, but with a smile that betrayed her pride and gladness that her boy had thrown himself and his wounded young relative upon her, sure of the blessed opening of his mother's arms. She would open them; she would be decently unselfish; she would make herself the friend and comforter of this

poor little London wreck ; refitting her, perhaps, through the long, peaceful, perfumed garden hours that lay before them, for a second, more prosperous voyage.

But time was slipping, and she must prepare for her expedition. Anie must have the large room in her own wing, with the dressing-closet done in Chinese lacquer. That might amuse her. The whole house was ever aired and open, sweet with morsels of herbs strewn in drawer and cupboard, fresh as the garden breezes could make it, floating in at every wide-set window.

Gita Edmonton, her letters and her gay silk embroidery bag on her arm, removed her feet from the hassock with the quaint little air of precision that marked her movements when she was not bored, and walked over to a diminutive table, reared upon four disproportionately long and slender legs, upon which stood an ivory bell, carved in the shape of a dame of the eighteenth century, with high-dressed head and full panniers looped over a laced petticoat. In answer to the little lady's voice, a young maid, with a round-cheeked, country air, entered, and was told to fetch Miss Peet-Byng. In a moment the desired one made her appearance, taking small, hurried steps under a black skirt that was too long for her, so that she held it up in front with one swollen, rheumatic hand. She was tall and thin, flat and fair, with a square of black thread-lace pinned on her head, beneath which her yellowish-grey hair was laid in meagre bands. Her eyes were blue and pale, but kind and not unintelligent, a large nose bespoke generosity of spirit, and, even if her poor chin did dwindle away, goodness and gentleness rested on her lips. She was once Varian's nursery-governess, his

cherished "Peetybee," and since he outgrew her she had been the faithful, ever-ready buffer between Mrs. Edmonton and that oppressive, hostile, unknown, but much-dreaded region where servants stalk, household bills breed like maggots, and where, in order to live, you must be piratically bold, dauntless, and defiant—simply the world of every-day, and therefore no place at all for the soul of Gita Edmonton, though good Miss Peet-Byng swam as untiringly in it as in a native element.

"Bee, sit down. I've had a letter this morning that makes it necessary for me to go up to town this afternoon to bring down one of Etta's girls, Anie, the elder. She is worn out—you remember what a pale little scrap she always was—and the garden here and the good air will set her up. But we are so unused to guests, you and I. Can you manage it for me, Bee, so that our daily routine is as little disarranged as possible?"

Miss Peet-Byng raised a hand in protest, or was she taking a domestic oath?

"Don't, I pray you, dear Gita, give yourself one instant of anxiety. Guest or no guest, you will find that the household will move exactly as usual. Your precious hours must be safeguarded, if I have to sit on your doormat as a sentinel. But, perhaps it will brighten you to have the young thing here, and my boy will relish that. He thinks you too pale. He told me so."

"Oh, that dear Varian! He is becoming a tremendous fuss about his old mother. I do believe, Bee, that I am looking forward to having Anie. I really know nothing of Etta's girls, and this one was always

Varian's favorite. He wrote about her at great length in his letters from Crops. They read together. It will make it easier for me if she cares for books. Then we shall never be at a loss for table-talk. . . . Now, what about her quarters? I had thought of the grey room in my wing. She must have plenty of air, and that one has three windows. The white roses are beginning to hang around them so enchantingly. Then the lacquer dressing-closet is one of the best things in the house, with its extraordinary little men-monkeys. You could study those tiny figures for hours—not that I want the child to, but I like to have that room used. It brings it to life again. . . . What do you say? "

"A perfect selection, except for one thing. Won't she be too near you? You might hear her moving," said Bee, wrinkling up her nose thoughtfully.

"Nonsense! I must change my habits if a child's footfall is to annoy me. But you can hear nothing, I am quite sure. The small passage between deadens any sound. Let us consider that settled. Have everything arranged for to-night. Put in flowers—the tulips, I think—a few coppery ones among the pink. If the car comes around by five, I shall have plenty of time to drive slowly. It will be safer to have dinner at 8.30. Anie can bring a few things with her in a dress-basket, and have down later whatever she may need. Our life is so much of a perpetual retreat that one could really almost manage with a couple of frocks."

"Will she bring a maid? "

"Good gracious, I had not thought of that! No, I cannot have a strange woman poking about here. If Anie is as helpless as most London girls, Page can

do for her. Tell Page that she may be required to maid Miss Cassock. Dear, good Bee, what should I ever do without you? You are certainly the captain of my wandering little barque."

Miss Peet-Byng's hollow cheeks ran up the unwonted signal of a blush—pleasure and embarrassment contending within her.

"Oh, say, rather, the faithful cabin-boy, who must be about his duties this very minute."

She got up nervously, with a subdued, mysterious rattling as of keys in some far-hidden, submerged pocket.

At a few moments before six, Mr. Edmonton's car turned into the comparative quiet of Belgrave Square, large and leafy, inundated with a thick, golden, summer atmosphere, not more than moderately polluted with petrol. Gita eyed the pompous stucco façade of her half-sister's abode with a tired appreciation of what it must mean to lead a life that made such a setting not only appropriate but desirable.

Presently Lady Cassock was begging Mrs. Edmonton, through the medium of an unnaturally slim footman, to come to her in her bedroom.

"My dearest girl, will you forgive me asking you to come up in this way, *sans façon*?"

Lady Cassock commenced the pantomime of one laboriously rising from a couch. Gita came forward and put her hands on her sister's shoulders.

"Don't move, Etta, please. I can sit here directly in front of you. How are you?"

"Dog-tired, of course, at this pitch of the season, but one must keep up. I'm taking Estelle out, you

know. She's off at this moment to Grove House with Lady Juliet to attend a meeting for giving something to somebody. Who can remember such things? You haven't seen Estelle for years, have you? She is considered very pretty, and is a comfort to her mother."

This was delivered by Lady Cassock in a manner to indicate that there were such beings as ungrateful children who were *not*.

Gita saw her opening. "How is Anie? Is she visible? I would so much like to see her."

Here Lady Cassock's too well-corseted efforts to sit up becoming increasingly desperate, Gita hurriedly stuffed another foolish little embroidered pillow behind her sister, with about as much effect as a pebble would have in damming a stream.

"I shall die if I don't get out of this thing! . . . Ah, that's better. I do believe I am growing a bit heavier. Do you notice any change, eh?"

"Um—m, no, perhaps not," murmured Gita soothingly. "A Spa in August will set you up, or—down. That's what we all want nowadays with these impossible skirts, isn't it? But what about Anie?"

Etta Cassock's ruddy, high-nosed, square-jawed countenance became slightly more suffused across the mottled cheek-bones, under the ironlike curves of rigidly undulated, fairish hair.

"I am exceedingly vexed with her," she answered with asperity. "She is most trying, moping about with no reason, looking like a wet rag. If I did not know her so well, I would say she was jealous of Estelle. She refuses to go anywhere. I believe she still rides, but never with her sister at a suitable time,

when other people are in the Row, and she won't even have Dixon. It is most trying and stupid. She looks half-ill. I shall have to take her to Dr. Partridge—but when have I the time? How intensely awkward were she to become ill at this moment with something infectious. There's so much of it going around. Then where should we all be? Quarantined in the middle of the season!" Etta Cassock moved her high head impatiently, so that her long, jewelled ear-rings shook like tiny, flaming tongues. Suddenly a thought struck her.

"Gita, it is providential your coming this afternoon. Would you take her off my hands for a month? She is no good here. Would you? I'll send for her at once. Marcelle!" To the sharp, alert Frenchwoman in the doorway she gave the necessary order. Her relief in clutching at Gita was both frank and unashamed. To get rid of a possible germ-carrying daughter was manifestly a first necessity.

While they waited, Gita answered at random numerous irrelevant questions about her life at Wimbledon that her sister felt called upon to put to her. Poor Etta! Such an existence as Gita led, within the thick-shrubbed walls of her garden, seemed to her to indicate active mental decay. Both had their eyes more or less on the door through which presently the object of their thoughts came forward with that light, hesitating, sidling step. "You would almost suppose she limped," Lady Cassock was in the habit of exclaiming with disgust. "What a pathetic little bundle of nerves!" thought Gita sympathetically.

The girl came to her and kissed her with a soft pres-

sure, affectionately but a little shyly, troubled perhaps at the innocent conspiracy they were practising together.

"What have you been doing to your eyes, may I ask?" demanded her mother, visions of summer-grippe, which is so disfiguring, you know, floating through her mind. Then, without seeming to expect an answer, she plunged at once. "What do you say to going down to Wimbledon with your Aunt Gita until you can pull yourself sufficiently together to behave suitably here in town? It is very awkward to refuse invitations for you and then to have you seen about. Juliet Newhaven spoke of catching sight of you in a taxi—in your habit, she thought. What on earth were you doing? And, of course, she couldn't see why you were not well enough to go to her cotillion. With your looks in their present state, you're no credit to your mother, I assure you."

"I'm sorry, mamma. I have tried to keep out of the way. If Aunt Gita will have me, I would so love to stay with her."

Mrs. Edmonton took the girl's hand. "I ran up to-day with the half-intention of capturing you for the week-end, but now I can have the pleasure of keeping you for an indefinite time. The garden is lovely, and we drink wonderful milk. But why not take her down with me this afternoon, Etta? I motored up. Ask them to put a few things in a dress-basket, Anie, will you? And run and get your hat and cloak—a warm one. If we start in fifteen minutes, we shall do it nicely before dinner. Will you, dear?"

"May I, mamma?"

"Why not? Tell Marcelle to help you. Oh, by the way, leave your pearls for Estelle. You won't need them at Wimbledon. Don't lift anything. Let Marcelle do it."

"It isn't necessary for her to bring a maid, Etta. We can do all that is needful."

"I did not intend that she should take anyone. The girls share a maid, but, of course, Estelle must have her now. Every night next week is engaged three deep. Mothers must be made of steel these days. It is fortunate you have only a boy. How is Varian? He quite cuts us."

"My dear Etta, what nonsense! He is working hard, and neither of us could ever keep up with you, you know."

"By the way, do you know Lady Nunholme?" asked Lady Cassock.

"The name merely, from Varian," replied Gita. "He sees something of the son, Sir Ambry Nunholme."

"Oh, he knows him, does he?" Lady Cassock paused a moment. "I must look up that young man. Estelle, who is not in the least impressionable, has spoken of him to me on three distinct occasions. His mother has re-married—a Mr. Something-or-Other, but whether the money is his or hers—" Etta was falling into the familiar rut of a financial muse when her daughter appeared, looking half her age in a mulberry-coloured motor bonnet of shirred taffetas.

"Good-bye, mamma. Marcelle has the pearls." She bent over her mother, and they exchanged a peck on the cheek-bone.

Mrs. Edmonton got up.

"Good-bye, Etta, and many thanks for Anie. I shall keep her until she is as rosy as her bonnet."

"So you are off? Estelle and I may run down some day, if we can squeeze it in. You have ducal neighbours, I hear. Do you ever give garden parties?"

"Never!" exclaimed Gita, and on that note of decision swept her niece away.

As they started from the door in their panting car, Mrs. Edmonton suddenly said, turning to the young girl, "We are so near Varian here. Shall we bob in on him for a moment?" but, noticing a frightened little movement on Anie's part, reproached herself for being indiscreet, and turned the matter off. "Perhaps not, we are a bit late, and he is probably dressing for dinner, if he is in at all. We shall have him with us to-morrow. Do you mind?"

Hadn't Varian leaned over her so charmingly with that very same question? Anie's eyes filled again with tears, and she squeezed Gita's hand without speaking.

"Dear child," murmured that lady. "Let us play that I am your mother, too, for the time that you are with me. Tell me what you will, or be silent—whatever you do, we are friends and comrades from this moment."

"Then may I call you Gita? You seem so young," said Anie, stuffing a moist scrap of handkerchief out of sight. Gita laughed her assent.

A hideous reaction had kept Anie white and shaken ever since she had left the house in Gordon Square the preceding afternoon. "Ambry—Ambry—Ambry," all night long she had clung to his name as instinctively as she would have thrown her poor little body at him had

he been there. Then across the dark, impure flood that seemed to be sweeping her away light would break in fantastic squares through which Varian appeared—Varian as he had been years ago at Crops, the slim schoolboy in flannels, with bare head, and Varian as he had looked yesterday when he had sat beside her on that miserable sofa. . . . She choked back that other name, holding her hot throat with hotter hands, forcing flesh and spirit back into those cool, quiet water-meadows of the soul, where there is peace.

Now, as the car jolted her against this kind Gita, his mother, who was snatching her away from Ambry-haunted London streets and squares, Anie felt a blessed numbness, creeping softly as a cloud over her whole jarred and wounded being, melting the arid hardness, seeming to stroke her as with long, flexible, soothing fingers. Ah, she would do well at Wimbledon, she knew it. She came back to hear Gita saying nervously, "To such a country body as I have become, this confusion is simply intolerable."

They were in the full tide of a late afternoon in the roaring season, their car wedged in a mass of his brother monsters, all engaged alike in chugging, jerking, gurgling, and expelling nauseous fumes. Gita leaned forward to tell Peters that he must turn into a by-way, must carry them around through quiet streets, even if it did make them late for dinner. Presently they were gliding through what appeared, by contrast, the transfixed, frozen calm of a city of the dead—merely a pleasant, tranquil thoroughfare, in rather a poor quarter, but quite self-respecting.

"Oh, what a charming sight! Go slowly, Peters," exclaimed Gita, drawing her companion's attention to a certain dairy shop that you and I know quite well, set up in an old-fashioned house with a large bow-window in which are arranged, with what would seem extraordinary taste to a casual eye, such as Gita's, the milk, the cream, the cheeses on the tiles and in the baskets, the panniers full of eggs, the golden pats of butter, the pots of pinks between the jars, the whole delightful Della Robbia palette of whites and creams, greens and yellows and blues.

Anie leaned forward to see better. "What a pretty woman in there, too! Did you see her? What a lark to live in a tiny room and to buy your food here! Everything looks so fresh and spotless. See what good curtains there are at the back windows. Perhaps some one quite nice keeps the little shop as a fad."

"I wonder," says Mrs. Edmonton. "I must remember the street, and tell Varian to look it up. He is fond of out-of-the-way, quaint things, and certainly that shop is a jewel. It actually expresses something. The pretty woman inside is doubtless as fresh and sweet as her wares. I like that." She turned to Peters, "As soon as the road is clear, go as fast as we dare." Then to Anie, "Dear child, I am so anxious to install you in my garden, in the sun, with never an idea in your poor little tired head, with nothing to do but to watch the bees, to smell the flowers, and to drink our wonderful milk. I feel as if I should like to send in our surplus to that delightful shop to be doled out to sick babies and homeless cats. Do you know, that is not such a bad idea. We might talk it over with Varian,

and he could investigate, see the pretty housewife, and make the arrangements."

"Oh, I am going to be so happy with you, dear Gita," whispered Anie, as the car shot up the shadowy drive to the long, white house, glimmering pale in the evening light, a blur of candles showing hospitably between the misty curtains, good Miss Peet-Byng waiting for them, a little anxiously, at the top of the shallow round of steps.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT is again the fragrant, tea-filled, twilight hour, the best of all the day, some two weeks after what Quin would call the Adventure of the Match. In handing Varian that necessary implement that day near Oxford Street, Quin, this child of Cloudland, imperfectly fitted into his habit of sandwichman, was put at once into spiritual contact with lives not his own by the mere brushing of young Edmonton's hand against his. And lo, the trail led straight to the little lady in the riding-habit, and to the blond young gentleman, rasped, guilty, and uneasy in his flat in Wilton Place.

Coming home that evening to find Panta gone up early to his bed, Quin strangled mentally an unreasoning throb of joy at the thought of Bina alone by the hearth, facing him in that intoxicatingly domestic posture for a blessed hour or more. There, indeed, he found her ready for him, with her warm hand and her kind, fair face. His belated supper was forthcoming, set out on a napkin on a little round table, the tiny pan of toasted cheese one mass of living, golden bubbles. Then ale and a pipe, and his long, slim legs—those steel-like, flexible, muscle-rippling legs of the famous dancer—stretched out before him, with Bina's face, Bina's eyes, Bina's hair, wavering, beckoning, shimmering like a water-pixie's through the pipe smoke's hazy rings.

So he told her of that chance meeting, and of the giving of the match.

"Describe him," demanded Bina.

“Oh, a charming boy, a year or so younger than our Ambry. I caught the anxious, angry, wounded reflex of his interview with the latter from which he had just rushed blindly away. He, Varian, was killing time before going to meet the little lady. I gathered that his heart is more engaged than he dreams of. While still to the outward eye carrying my board and my fez and my towel suit along our weary beat, the better part of me, lifted by the cloud-current, was presently mounting the steps of a house in Gordon Square in the wake of Varian.”

“Do girls have such liberty? Had she gone there alone to meet Ambry?”

“A foolish, romantic, old German governess has winked at the affair, and lends her her sitting-room. My young man, inwardly writhing, asking himself just such questions as you have put, marched upstairs without giving his name, Ambry, not he, being expected.

“The whole interior, you must know, is dull and dim in the extreme, with odd little German woodcuts hung in a string along the wall of the staircase—Sans-Souci as it was a hundred years ago. We know it well, Bina, eh, when we tramped from village fête to village fête, blowing on our fingers when they were cold.”

“Yes, and I remember how you used to buy me a nice, roasted potato to slip in my old rabbit-skin muff to keep my hands warm while yours and Panta’s were freezing.—Those old days growing dimmer and dimmer as we become more—Cubical, for Panta cannot use his cloud-current as you do, and I never could.”

“Women rarely do. It is a trick of mental discipline. I have always found it easy.”

"But go on with—Varian, do you call him?" urged Bina, "that nice boy."

"He is lean and tall, with grey eyes and bright brown hair. He is intensely in earnest, frank, fresh, boyish, chivalrous, in love with the little lady, but too innocently inexperienced to realize what is the matter with him. I gathered, without paying much attention, that he and she are cousins of sorts, their respective mothers being half-sisters.

"Ambry, callously bent upon shaking off the little Anie, yet, if he were to meet her, knowing himself still sufficiently susceptible to her undeniable charm to weaken in his resolution, pitches upon his young friend Varian as a confidant. Dramatic moment when Varian discovers that it is his own cousin who is to be so humiliatingly disposed of. Now here comes in a rather curious thing that I do not quite understand myself. Being *en rapport* with Varian, I know that, at the most heated moment of the conversation in Ambry's rooms, he, Varian, believes himself to have had a vision of Anie as a little girl, supported by two odd, strangely-dressed figures, a man and a woman. Who but you and me, my dear!"

Bina sat up straight and stared, showing every traditional mark of the liveliest surprise.

"You and me, Quin? But how do you know?"

"Who else could it be? The fair woman in misty white, with a blue cloak, the man in glittering, diamond-barred tights, with a scrap of a black masque, and a wooden sword—Harlequin to the life, my child. You and I, manifestly, but how did we project ourselves, or, rather, how were we projected by the force of some

unknown connexion with the little Anie? To be sure, I had entered her circuit the day before the meeting in Wilton Place, when I caught her as she fell. Then I read off and told you of her letter to this precious Ambry. The circuit must be sufficiently strong between Varian and the little lady (he's in love with her, mind!) for an unconscious projection of herself to be visible to him at a moment of mental excitement, he, of course, being distinctly a sensitive—some Cubes can be astonishingly so. The fact that he loves her makes the vibrations more active. She, in the projection, drags me in because I had just entered her circuit, and I must have dragged you in because you are ever in mine—my Bina.”

Did Quin permit himself a warmer tone than usual? He seemed to fancy so, and, rather alarmed, puffed furiously for a moment upon his ancient, brown friend. Bina, in that baffling way of the beloved woman, was serenity itself.

“We may learn more of this later,” said she. “I am beginning to be so interested in it. It is much more exciting than reading a story, because you are behind the scenes, seeing and hearing the whole thing hammered and beaten into shape. . . . But what about Varian and his little lady?”

“The poor child took it gallantly enough at the moment. She is submerged in the rather overwhelmingly thick, but sweet and heady flood of this Ambry's merely physical personality. She struggles to keep her feet, but the memories of him that have burned into her poor little consciousness keep buffeting her, bowling her over, sucking her back. She has fast hold of Vari-

an's hand now, that young knight having put it very plainly to her that Ambry is hopelessly tired of her, anxious, desirous, nay, brutally bent on never setting eyes on her again if he can help it."

"How hard for the young thing!"

"Yes, it is rather a cold-blooded proceeding, but these Ambrys are a feature of our civilization, and they must be fed frequently with fresh girlish morsels. Some colder, more biting nature will make him heel one of these fine days—but never the Anie type. Our young Varian sees that he must get her out of London, away from the haunted pavements of Wilton Place, and from the too facile opportunities of Gordon Square, so he throws himself and his little wounded friend on his good mother at Wimbledon, who, I imagine, is his willing slave. I can tell you no more, for I grew too physically tired to make the constant effort of concentration necessary to expel the current and to receive the ticked-off messages. I came to myself—my self of the bathing establishment—to discover that I had distanced all my mates, and was trudging along an interminable, down-at-the-heel street, where every other house or garden gate crookedly bore a dismal *To be Let* sign, out somewhere near the Regent's Park."

"Oh, poor Quin! Why did you do it?"

"My dear, I was not aware of it at all. I was safe in Gordon Square, in that shady, cool, upper room, with Varian and Anie, both in such dead, youthful earnest, side by side upon a shabby sofa. But that confounded board on my shoulders was heavy by that time, I assure you. I hope some of those forlorn householders, with their unlettable houses on their necks, will slip

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off some fine day and drown themselves, like eyeless kittens, in 'our' great Bath, newly established in its gilded halls in Victoria Street. Then, poor devils, my long tramp will not have been in vain."

Bina laid aside her knitting—an old-fashioned habit she had picked up abroad, good for the long, storm-bound winter evenings by the glowing stove—and looked attentively at her companion.

"Quin, my friend, you distress me. You work too hard. You must not. This wonderful little shop makes more gold pieces than we have ever had together in our lives. You know that it is our common fund. You know that I could cry to see your eyes as weary as they are to-night. Don't!" She leaned across and put both hands on the arms of his chair, hemming him in, her dear, kind, fair face, with foolish little motherly wrinkles on the smooth brow, rather too maddeningly near him, especially as he really was fatigued, less master of himself than usual, the long afternoon in the grip of the cloud-current having induced its inevitable, sharp, physical reaction.

Pressing his head against the back of his chair, he summoned a smile, as nearly of the everyday variety as he could manage at such short notice, being convinced that this was not the moment to show her how moved he was.

"My dearest girl, your sympathy and care for me are the sweetest things in life." Here he laid a thin, finely-shaped, brown hand upon each of hers, gently detaching them from their hold upon his chair, keeping them in his quietly for a moment, and then putting them back in her lap on top of her knitting.

“I am tired to-night, I confess, but to come back to this little house, to find you here, to sit with you by the hearth, to have you minister to me with—toasted cheese—such cheese!” he blew an airy kiss, “ah, Bina, Bina, no sandwich-board could be heavy enough to oppress me after that. No, my dear, to be serious, it is not the physical fatigue that takes it out of me. I gave myself up a little too unreservedly this afternoon to our young friend’s lives, their predicaments, their emotions. I admit it has worked on me a bit. But this long body of mine, these legs and arms must be exercised rigorously—the endless tramps in the wind and the rain, or the dust and the sun, are what I need. The press and passage of the people, streaming up and streaming down, sending out infinite emotional waves that I catch, if I will, for amusement, or allow to drift by—all this gives to life a certain dim, ever-changing pattern, and I am out, watching for the proper pieces to slip into their places—such colours sometimes—green and bronze and red, red gold—that hover all over it, like an Indian scarf!”

He had pushed his chair nearer to her while speaking, fixing his eyes on her flying fingers. How the lamplight caught and sparkled on the long, steel needles, on a little, rosy nail!

She smiled at him. “You but half convince me, you know, but what chance does poor Columbine ever have against Harlequin? How I love the old names! I shall steal your sword some day and give you a fine drubbing with it when you are not looking. Then, perhaps, you will not wish honest householders to drown themselves like kittens.”

Quin laughed and felt ten years younger at once. "A foolish desire of mine, that, for it would give the Bath a bad name and then I should no longer be able to foot it gallantly in fez and towelling." He stretched himself with a slow luxuriousness, letting his long length half slide out of the leather chair, that slippery throne of poor Panta, who never can keep his ancient body firmly affixed to its worn cushions.

Running an idle hand into the pocketlike cavity under one of its arms, Quin drew forth a thin, misshapen, blotched volume, bound in defaced, gold-rubbed calf, with a certain fly-specked, weather-beaten air, as though it had worn out weary days and longer nights in some wooden trough, some catchpenny counter of the second-hand man. How many idle, or trembling, or merely soiled fingers had pricked it out, in a moment's curiosity, only to cast it back again, in its poor sixpenny section, with its battered brethren, repelled by the forbidding obscurity of its title—"The Immortal Gymnast?"

How many had conceived it to be a set of rules and directions as to how to comport one's self in the presence of a trapeze, set up, say, in one's back garden; or a manual to inculcate the right use of the horizontal bars, the Swedish ladder, or what not? These hardy pioneers, interested in Physical Culture—what a fellow can get for himself after shop hours—would pluck it forth eagerly, turn over a few pages, then drop it with a glazing eye, and the almost inevitable use of one or two of those cutting adjectives dear to the tongue of uncultured youth.

But our friend Pantaloon was never one to be deterred

by appearances. In a morning stroll on the sweet shady side of—but what does the street matter since it was certainly not Pall Mall?—he was wont to loiter like any other amiable old gentleman, in front of the booksellers' shops, for the mere pleasure of running his eye over the heterogenous titles of these waifs and strays, these hapless paupers of that Kingdom of Letters where the maimed, the disfigured, the crippled, the blind, nay, even the still-born, are as shamelessly displayed as in any human clinic.

Being in a fair way of immortality himself, and having a dear and intimate friend and companion who was nothing if not gymnastic, Pantaloon, with quickened interest, drew the thin, speckled, mildewed volume from between its two vulgar, blowsy neighbours, and fell to reading it there upon the walk, holding it well up under his nose, as his spectacles were not upon his person. They never were. For ten minutes Panta read on, "The Immortal Gymnast," enjoying the first real triumph of his life since publication. He had "arrived," if only to the consciousness of an idle old man, but that was glorious enough recognition after fifty years of baffling, unpremeditated incognito.

Panta rarely dispensed even so modest a sum as sixpence without one thought, but when this chance opportunity presented itself to acquire such a bestirring chap, so vivid and entertaining, so fresh and strange, once you drew apart his mouldy, speckled covers and listened to his heart beat, our Panta, without the least hesitation, once he had been jostled from his reader's dream by a pushing, outward-bound customer, marched into the tumbled, stale tobacco-haunted shop, dark after

the sun on the pavement, and allowed to tinkle down upon the counter the bright, required coin.

"Oh, that is something Panta picked up yesterday," said Bina in answer to Quin's look of inquiry. "He was full of it at teatime to-day, when you were not here. He says he will read it to us, when he gets a bit farther on in it himself. It is some strange and unknown treatise on the soul, isn't it? Something philosophic?"

"Manifestly," replied Quin. "In what odd terminology they swim, these old boys!" He turned the yellowish, crackling leaves.

Ten quick minutes ticked away. The neglected Bina stifled but imperfectly a skeleton yawn. Quin was all attention at once, stuffing back into its pocket-like cell the history of the immortal one.

"You poor, sleepy child! Time to lock up, eh?"

They stood together while she lighted two candles, and then bent over, with that most charming of feminine curves—the yielding dip at the waist—to blow out the lamp.

"Good-night," she said, smiling at him, her dark, soft eyes above the candle flame, her small pink hand curved to cherish its smoky flicker.

"Good-night," he echoed, as she drew open the door that concealed the tiny well of the staircase, putting into that banal refrain, with the warmth of the voice, with the absorption of the eye, as much as he dared of that intense feeling, dammed back as it habitually was, that now rose in him at the sight of this beloved woman going up to bed with her candle in her hand.

CHAPTER SIX

QUIN being again absent at teatime the following day, it was not until the evening that the three were gathered together in their accustomed places—Panta in the leather chair, armed with his book, absently speeding some stray crumbs off his old striped waistcoat with a forefinger in brisk action with his thumb; Quin, on the floor, his back against the side of the empty fireplace, smoking a cigarette, his famous legs coiled with professional negligence; Bina, in a little rush chair by the lamp, her everlasting knitting in her swiftly-moving hands.

Presently Panta, who had been dying for an opening, said:

“This fellow here, in this book, tries to show that it doesn’t really matter what kind of people we are—I might just as well be Bina, and Quin might just as well be me.”

“As well as what?” asked Bina. Panta very properly took no notice of her. How could he? He continued:

“I should judge this man to be a philosopher, not being one myself. He means that we are really, ultimately, all the same thing—gymnasts, he calls us because we turn back on ourselves—that deep-down Us that says ‘I am I,’ and not another living thing. But when I say, ‘I am Pantaloon,’ that is something different entirely.”

“So he has two ‘I’s,’ ” put in Quin, “one with clothes off and one with clothes on, you, Pantaloon, being the wardrobe, as it were——”

“But it’s the strangeness of it all, if it be true,” persisted Pantaloon. “And why not? It seems so far away from the business and the shop, from this little room, from the candles and the lamp, and from—us. But this fellow knows that tremendous things are going on underneath everything all the time. Oh, he sees it as clear as print—an old chap he must have been, dead these fifty years or more.”

“And here we sit, as snug as you please, nothing going around but the hands of the clock,” puts in Bina. Quin smiled at her, but addressed Panta:

“Listen to me, Panta. Let us grant the inside gymnast, all alike for all of us, but what about our outsides, our bodies? How and why do we get them, and why are they all different? Have you got as far as that?”

The old man sat crumpled up in his chair, with the book sustained on a generous hunch in his waistcoat.

“These philosopher-chaps don’t fit it out so clear and neat as we would make it, Quin,” he replied, “if we sat down to write. You can’t ever find an answer to a plain question like that, not in so many words. I’ll warrant you he’ll say something about it later. ‘Experience’ is a word he’s always using. That means what happens in the world. Now our bodies walk us about this world, so he must put in a bit about how we gymnast-fellows get our bodies, and what they are——”

“But it’s all so simple, you foolish men,” cried Bina merrily. “If I pinched you, Quin, or kissed you,

Panta, you wouldn't be asking where your bodies came from——”

“But we'd thank God we had 'em and be quiet,” laughed Quin. “Isn't that it? When you feel something, you know it, but when you know something, you don't always feel it, so it doesn't work both ways.”

Bina threw up her hands in mock horror at this fallacious explanation, and, womanlike, sought relief in a material sedative.

“Let me get your pipe, Quin. You are never yourself when you smoke those foolish little paper-covered bundles.” She got up so quickly that beneath her gown you saw her pretty slim ankles and the flash of a bright buckle on her shoe. Her hand went behind the clock, whose hoarse, arrogant tick proclaimed age and incompetency, and reached down to Quin his smoky, brown companion.

His eyes had never left her, and he continued to fix her fair face through the thin violet wreath that presently arose from the hot heart of his dumb, ignited friend.

Some twenty minutes passed in this agreeable fashion, Panta reading out a tremendous paragraph now and then, Bina making great play with her slender, steel, domestic weapons, stabbing them remorselessly through the soft, yielding meshes of the grey wool, and Quin—lazy, languid, graceful, virile Harlequin—lying prone upon the rug, so close to Bina that he could have laid a nervous brown hand upon that slim foot in its buckled shoe, did he but have the courage. Instead, he kept both hands carefully behind his head, out of harm's way, gripping his pipe between his firm, white teeth.

Presently Panta looked up, struck by their silence.

"I must say, Bina, my child, that sixpence was well spent. Here we've sat up till—Lord bless my soul! eleven o'clock, and there are chapters and chapters to be gone through yet." Panta closed his famous book with a resounding smack, leaned back like a weary warrior, and prepared himself for the felicitations of his friends.

"It is wonderfully interesting, Panta dear," beams little sly Bina. "I know I shall not sleep to-night."

Poor child, she had, after the manner of her sex, confused the chaste problems of high philosophy with the vulgar terrors of a psychical research report. But what can a fellow do?

Quin, uncommonly practical, rose to his feet and went to look for beer. Bina made an hospitable clatter with their evening mugs, and all three drank deep to the health of the immortal gymnast whose hidden activities they had just begun ominously to suspect in their own internal economies—cloud-capped as they knew themselves to be.

Panta said good-night, and bundled off up the stairs. The other two lingered for a further chat. Each night they seemed to find it harder to go their separate ways—the cloud-currents drew them more feebly and more feebly, the sweep of the Cubical life in which they were caught became stronger and stronger, hurtling them ever nearer that brink beyond which lies, sunny and simple, shining in the light of common day, the happy destiny of two united Cubes. No more launching out of the soul on the cloud-current, O disfranchised Harlequin, no more proud withdrawal from the clamour, the

heat, the dust of this Cubical life that hems you in on every side. No more of that, to be sure, but what instead do the gods place in your hands,—a human hearth of your very own, all bright and flamy, fed by human love—whose love but Columbine's, grown at last to be a woman, grown at last to be your wife? And at the end of all, a human death, a sleep and a forgetting. No longer this torpid, semi-immortality that begins now to weigh so irksomely, as you look back drearily through the cloud-piled years. Something like this flashed through Quin's mind as he watched Bina rinse out the mugs and range them neatly on their accustomed shelf, he, meanwhile, industriously knocking the ashes out of his pipe to give himself a countenance. But, being Quin, he must needs kick against the manifest flow of the earth-current. Figuratively swinging his cloud-cap, he gave battle with the deceptively harmless and misleading phrase: "I wonder how the little lady likes her haven at Wimbledon? That young Varian is a pleasing lad."

Bina bit instantly. "I was on the point of asking you about them to-night, when Panta plunged us so deep in his philosophic tub that I, for one, all wet and stringy, couldn't crawl out. But, Quin, can't you tell what they are doing, aren't you still—what do you call it?—*en rapport*?"

"No, that's the deuce. I am becoming weaker and weaker. Ages ago I could follow a trail for a month without a fresh scent, but now, like a poor, decrepit, half-blind old hound, I must be put on anew. Until I run across one or other of them again I am as ignorant as any placid Cube."

"You know that Varian lives in Cambridge Street—not so far from here. Don't you think the good people of that neighbourhood should be told about the Bath? It is your manifest duty to patrol that street from end to end."

"Alas," sighed Quin in mock despair, "we poor devils have our inevitable 'beat,' and I am on the Oxford Street gang at this moment. I have a feeling in my bones, however, that I am about to take a bit of a holiday——"

"Really?" cried Bina, coming close to have a good look at him. "Oh, I am so glad! Your poor eyes are tired, tired, tired."

"Nonsense, my good child. But the fact is, I must have some hard work in a gymnasium. It's *noblesse oblige* with me not to let these legs and arms stiffen. There are some new dances hovering in my fancy that I want to work out, and when I have them well started, we'll do them together here. But how do you, my dear Bina, keep yourself as supple as a willow-wand, while your poor Harlequin gets so shaky and old?"

"Ladling new milk, filling baskets and jars, unpacking eggs, and flying from door to window, from counter to shelf, fifty times a day," laughed Bina, wreathing her arms above her head, and swaying her young body in one of her old-time "movements."

"Charmin'," said Quin between his teeth, staring at the wall beyond her.

"As for you calling yourself old and stiff," continued Bina, "that is simply a brazen and abandoned attempt to extract compliments from me. Well, since you must have your sugar-plum, here it is: I give you

my word that I have never seen a more delightfully graceful line and pattern than you coiled your wonderful legs into this very night, sitting on the floor, with your back to the fireplace. That is by no means an easy thing to do, either, and you had been tramping with that horrid sandwich-board all day. Oh, when are you going to give up the old thing and start your practice? Do it at once. I am wild to begin." Her eyes shone like stars, her soft hair seemed to ruffle itself into an airy crown, her whole little person quivered upward like a dancing flame.

"Patience, *carita*," cried Quin, "we mustn't let the old life carry us away again. We are sober householders now, not tripping it at the fair. We must go slowly. . . . How beautiful you always were when you danced! Oh, Bina, Bina, this won't do. Give me my candle, and let me carry my weary old bones up to bed. To-day is Friday. A week from to-morrow I resign from the sandwich corps, despite the passionate remonstrances that I feel sure will burst from the lips of the commanding officer. Thus do I cut short a promising, if not lucrative, career."

Quin had succeeded in escaping from the dangerously sweet, dangerously emotional atmosphere that seemed to hang about the quiet, brown, smoky room, simply because Bina, suddenly becoming a starry Columbine, had chosen to dance across it on the tips of highly-trained toes. No more to-night.

He would not let her blow out the lamp, but sent her upstairs ahead of him, and performed that last, mystic, domestic rite himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON her first night at Wimbledon, Anie shivered down into her great, white bed, pulling her blue bedgown up about her in a trembling, nervous chill. Gita had been good to her, and the whole quiet house, with its halls, its galleries, its large, square saloons, set about with such deep, inviting chairs, such somnolent sofas, seemed to hold out comfortable mother-arms to the girl who had never felt the pressure of a similar embrace. Nevertheless, here she was lying, chattering her poor teeth, biting her lips to keep back the sobs, drawing up the miserable little icy feet into the folds of her gown. She would not think of London, of a London at this midnight hour, waking, turning out of its drowse, hanging itself with streamers of light, rolling out crimson carpets, opening windows on balcony and garden to let in the warm, scented air—because you become so hot when you dance. It was the night of Lady Juliet's cotillion. Estelle had a new gown for it, something green and very tight. Anie held her hands over her eyes, pressing the throbbing eyeballs. Between the red and blue sparks, revolving like desperate demon-driven wheels, she could see Ambry quite plainly coming up the staircase, with that high head she knew so well each trick of, with those bold, full charming eyes, looking past Lady Juliet, tired and distinguished, with a splendid diamond crown too heavy for her—looking past his hostess, ruthlessly, definitely,

with a vivid intent and purpose, but looking for what? For a tall girl with curling, red lips and dark eyes, her flexible waist and long, slender, beautifully shaped legs bound in the tight green sheath of satin, recognizable by an initiate as the latest thing in ball-gowns, but recalling, to a detached observer, nothing so much as the delicate wrappings of certain flower-stalks. . . . Estelle!

"Now I must stop, I must stop," murmurs Anie, sitting up in bed. "I must hold tight to Varian and to what he told me. I wish I were proud. I wish I could feel outraged and insulted. Estelle would, in my place, but such a thing could never happen to her." A tiny star of a nightlight wavered and trembled in the whispering current of air from the large, black night-pools framed in each of the opened windows. The small white figure, trailing its billowy garment, let itself down from the high bed, moved quickly, with bare, cold feet, without the slightest noise, to a great wardrobe, opened it gently, drew out a dressing-bag, fumbling among the gold-stoppered vials. . . . Back in bed, with those innocent-looking white pellets in your hand. There, between your fingers, you hold dreams and forgetfulness. You hold the keys to sleep, to delicious, indescribable sensations that steal away your pain, your soreness, all the fever of your wounded soul. Should she take them now instead of fighting? The time until dawn would seem so long, so hag-ridden, lying here alone in the great bed, in the strange room, in the silent old house. No roar of London in that whispering, flower-sweet breeze from the shrub-filled garden; no rattle of distant cabs, no hoarse gurgling of the motor

as it sets you down in Belgrave Square. Estelle would dance till sunrise. How lovely the light always looked across the great feathery trees as you drive home down Park Lane! He would be close to Estelle and to cross, sleepy mamma, saying good-night before striking off for Wilton Place. He liked the walk—the cool morning air after a hot dance. . . .

She threw herself back on her pillows, and held the white pellets to her mouth. Only swallow them, and in two minutes London and Ambry, Ambry and Estelle would fade and dwindle and perish, wiped away from your consciousness, painlessly, deliciously, as if by a large, moist sponge of exquisite, icy freshness. But the child still had some fight left in her. She dropped her closed hand on the bed. She wrenched her mind away from its obsession, and remembered where she was—in Varian's house, in Varian's mother's house—that kind, gentle Gita who had kissed her good-night with her soft mouth—how many hours ago was that? Oh, ages! To-morrow Varian would be down. How could she meet him as she knew she would be—sallow, heavy-eyed, broken, and fidgety, because the after-effects of the drug never really wore off till towards night? It was cowardly to take it. If she fought now, she would be stronger next time. She was doing it for Varian's sake. This was Varian's house, Varian's mother's house. She repeated this sentence over and over, making a mystical little sing-song tune of it, the words limping through her tired brain, losing their meaning on the way. . . . How deliciously drowsy she was beginning to feel! How cool and soft the air! It was blowing straight in on her forehead, blowing in—blowing in—blowing into Varian's

mother's house. The little head sank lower and lower, its coils of dark hair streaming out on either side of the indentation in the pillow. In her sleep, the closed hand uncurled, the white pellets rolled unheeded out of the rosy palm. What a hunt she had for them in the morning, waking up fresh and clear-eyed, thirsty for her cup of tea! It was a rush to be dressed by ten when good Miss Peet-Byng was to show her the garden. Before she went down, however, she emptied a certain little vial, holding dangerous keys to dangerous pleasures, into the wood fire that had been lighted in the lacquer dressing-room to take off the morning chill.

The broad, shallow stairs lead you, with a proper stately bend, into the large hall, furnished and used as an antechamber. Several good French chairs are drawn up near low tables, each carrying its reading-lamp; bookcases have been fitted in at the sides of the fireplace, and mellow lines of gilded calf meet the eye pleasantly, their classic ranks broken at just the right intervals by bold blocks of jaunty, yellow-uniformed soldiers of fortune from across the Channel. Glass doors and French windows open at the front on the rounded steps of the portico and the long, green, park-like vista of the drive; at the rear, on the flagged terrace, cut into bricked steps that fall steeply away to the gardens, the rose-alleys, the shrub tunnels, the box *bosquets*, shimmering, odorous and aromatic, gold and crimson, white and mauve and orange under the summer sun.

Anie, looking like a child in a blue linen frock, found Miss Peet-Byng waiting for her, nervously

twisting a pair of garden scissors in her long, gouty fingers.

"Did you sleep well, my dear?" she asked, a genuine, gentle interest in what she was saying lending dignity to the banal phrase.

"Better than for nights and nights. I love your wonderful air blowing in on my face. And Aunt Gita? Have you seen her this morning?"

"Oh, no, she does not see anyone till luncheon, but she never forgets to send me a little pencilled scrawl, saying that all is well with her." You were aware that the faithful Peet-Byng treasured these flying slips, regarding their bestowal in the light of an accolade from her sovereign. Good, faithful, gouty Peetybee! Her boy would be down this afternoon, and, her heart singing as it beats, she takes his pale little cousin in tow with more than her usual tremulous anxiety to shelter and to be of service.

"Shall we go out in the garden now? I will take a basket, in case you may want to pick anything, and the scissors." While talking, the good lady was busily pinning on her head, well over her eyes, a large, black hat shaped like an inverted porridge-bowl.

"Hat?" she murmured interrogatively, looking at the beautiful dense cloud of the girl's hair.

"No; one of these sunshades, if I may," replied Anie, picking out a big, flat, green one with a charming bamboo stick.

"A book, too?" suggests Miss Peet-Byng, "for when I have once settled you, you won't want me pottering about." Her eye caught a small volume that had slipped behind a cushion in one of the chairs.

"The very thing to talk to Varian about this afternoon. He left it here last week. Shall I bring it along?"

Anie smiled her unnecessary assent. So she must pretend to be interested in this cadaverous sixteenth-century Toledan painter, since Varian evidently was. The girl visibly brightened, as they stepped out on the terrace, for what youthful ache could withstand that charming garden scene, lawn upon lawn, flower-carpet upon flower-carpet, originally planned in the French style, but allowed by a later, whimsical, feminine taste to be invaded, to be cut into, to be revolutionized by impudent creepers, by irregular beds, by straggling cones of unclipped shrubs, by all the natural aids to a mimic wilderness that English soil and English dampness provide with such ungrudging prodigality? Not Anie's for one.

They stood together for a moment before descending the first series of yellowish, moss-covered, weed-invaded steps.

"Here you may think green thoughts in a green shade," put in Bee shyly, as the girl did not speak. "There is scarcely any prospect, but who wants a view nowadays? One can get that almost vulgarly anywhere. But it has taken a hundred and fifty years of careful clipping to produce that lime tunnel. It is too shady and damp there now, in the morning, before the sun strikes it. There are some nice basket chairs near the Bois, behind the calceolarias. I could tuck you in there."

They walked on slowly, Anie twirling her parasol on her shoulder, stopping to press her little nose against

the great sun-warmed roses, petal upon petal luxuriously uncurling at this moment of perfect maturity.

"How like a theatre for a pastoral!" exclaimed Anie, as they came at last from behind a clump of beeches upon an oval stretch of level turf, backed by the wood they called the Bois—a thicket of young trees, clipped and trained into the similitude of a high dense wall of greenery in which some three, semi-circular, doorlike openings had been cut to lead the charmed eye down as many tapering sea-green twilight vistas to the customary *terme* at the end—Bacchus with his wineskin, a Faun with his pipes, Meleager with his hound—those delightful garden subjects of doubtful merit that we all know so well, and yet that come upon us anew, in each fresh arrangement, with that little shock of pleasure in their inevitable fitness that is the surest test of the ultimate sanity of Le Nôtre's schemes.

Anie discovered herself a willing victim to this green magic.

"What a duck of a place!" she breathed, lifting eyes less stained with violet, moving softer and redder lips.

Peetybee beamed. "I knew you would like it. Your Aunt Gita found nothing better than this in Italy, I am sure. It would be the very place for a midsummer-night's play. Such charming exits and entrances as one could make, flitting in and out of those little green archways. Stay here a moment, my dear, while I draw your chair nearer the cedar."

"But what are these extraordinary flowers, Miss Peet-Byng?" Anie bent over a curious, deep, wedge-

shaped bed that had apparently pushed itself into the left corner of the semicircle formed by the Bois.

"Oh, those are the *calceolarias*," replied Peetybee rather indistinctly, engaged as she was in struggling with a basket chair that seemed endowed with a wholly malicious, half-human determination to cling to the soil with all four of its foolish, knoblike, wicker feet.

Anie gazed a trifle disdainfully at the bed, remembering the warm, soft, odorous roses, for these curious flowers, shaped like a witch's pocket, have a certain repellent, sinister, animal look about them. With their swollen pendulous lips they might be secret poison-bags into which small, night-hawking creatures might dip tongue or snout. In the mass, what earthy, twilight colours they show! They run to dull browns, to ashy violets, and to all the tones of clay, each blossom blotched and freckled with spots of orange or of golden bronze, almost like an eruption of disease.

"Horrid things!" said Anie, "they make me shiver." She turned away, furling her green sunshade as she spoke.

"Stick this in your frock as an antidote," said Bee, handing the girl a long sprig of heliotrope. "It always seems to me to be the flower of our grandmothers. It is fresh and faded at the same time. If one may so express one's self about an odour, I should be tempted to call the perfume of heliotrope plaintive. Did you ever think of it in that way?" Peetybee lifted the basket into which she had thrown some clippings of the flower in question, with its flannelly leaves, its characteristic dashes of rust-brown among the violet.

"May I put it down on the grass beside me?" asked

Anie, looking up. "Yes, so. How comfy this chair is with little rests for my feet!"

"Are you quite sure you will not be bored here? Shall I send out a light wrap? Why didn't I think of it?" gently fussed Peetybee, patting and pulling Anie's linen gown, laying for an instant on the girl's beautiful head those gouty fingers with their marvellously tender touch.

"Dear Miss Peet-Byng, I have everything I need. I am deliciously lazy. I shall sun myself here like a pussy-cat."

"I am so glad. I will send word to you a half-hour before luncheon, when we meet in the breakfast-room."

"What time will Varian be here?" asked Anie, knowing that she would feel safer when she saw him, better able to keep down certain cravings, to give fiercer battle to the Children of the Pit once he held her hand in his cool, firm grasp.

Bee's face softened admirably, with the wistful motherliness of elderly, childless women.

"My old boy," she said, quaintly unconscious of the rather rollicking sound of the phrase. "He always tries for the 2.10. That brings him here just when we are idling over the fruit in the Green Saloon after luncheon. Gita dislikes sitting long at table, and we always move before our dessert, our fruit, or our coffee, preferably into the room you saw last night. It is called green on account of those little parrots in the pattern of the paper. To be sure one scarcely notices them. But how I ramble on! Good-bye, my dear."

Anie watched the tall, lean figure, trailing its full,

old-fashioned black silk skirts across the close-cropped grass.

Languidly at first, then more boldly, more vigorously, her jarred and fatigued senses were captured by those airy garden sprites that lie in wait for us in all shady, tranquil spots, hanging rosy shades before our eyes, ringing faint, far, dizzying, flower-bell music in our ears, stupefying us gently with odours as spicy as the East, brushing our lips with golden honeydrops, tying our idle hands with gossamer ribbons, binding our weary feet with cool, mossy sandals. So we lie there, in their power, believing ourselves, nevertheless, to be quite free agents, although uncommonly disinclined to move, and rather sleepy.

Varian, meanwhile, in Cambridge Street, with rumpled hair and nervous eye, was furiously engaged at his writing-table, numbering and checking up his proofs, pasting thereon those little slips in his small, close handwriting, managing his tools—his ink, his scissors, his paste—with an energy born of a restless night, the consciousness of neglected work, and a certain very definite determination to reach Wimbledon as early as possible.

The afternoon before he had sat idly here, as it drew on toward six o'clock, imaginatively intent upon his mother's interview with Lady Cassock. Would she come down presently with that pale girl tucked under her protecting arm? He realized now, for the first time, how much he had counted on the success of his plan for removing Anie from London. What a fool he had been not to ask his mother to telegraph him! As she refused all intercourse with a telephone, and

refused to have one installed in the house, he could not "get" her in that way. But if she had been baulked of Anie, she would have come around here to him. She had not done so, therefore all was well. He felt too engrossed in his own affairs to be able to work with any insight upon those of the vague little Siennese genius he was at that moment supposed to be cutting out from Simone Martini's puzzling shadow.

He fidgeted at the window. The heavy, golden, dust-laden London air hung in the gently-swaying tops of the trees in the Square. He had become too restless to kick about his rooms. He felt suddenly bored to intensity with his surroundings. At that moment he desired ardently never to see again that heavily-laden table, those notebooks, the lamp, the rug, the fireplace, the photographs. He would walk it off. So through that long, misty, incomparably soft twilight he idled down one long street after another, making mechanically for the river, coming out upon it near Battersea Bridge. He leaned on the parapet near a man in brown velveteens, and let the greasy, grey-green flood carry him away to that sparkling sea wherein you embark in any fanciful, golden galley that happens to take your eye, each one ready manned and provisioned for no matter what mad, youthful quest. The potent smoke from the ancient pipe of the individual in velveteen beginning to steal rather too insistently over Varian's senses—it was perfectly good tobacco, only somewhat stronger than you cared to smoke yourself—Varian hailed a loitering taxi, and, healthy appetite sending no uncertain message, he was

presently facing a very complete little meal in a quiet place he knew of.

Several hours later, digging his pillows savagely because they were too soft and too hot—sleepless, restless, nervous, Varian told himself that he had eaten too much. Perhaps he had; but that was not the reason for his white night. Down at Wimbledon, in a large, cool, shadowy room, was there a small, dark head on the pillow? Was Anie sleeping in his mother's house? Was she dreaming of Ambry—confound him!—with the tears drying on her lashes? The boy lay still, with his arms folded, thinking of her intently, of the girl who, at that very moment, had seemed to catch hold of his hand, to beg him to help her, there in Wimbledon, to fight a little longer. . . . Could he help her without knowing it? It seemed so, for he, too, there in London, had fallen asleep just as those small fingers had relaxed enough to allow certain innocent-looking white pellets to roll out upon the sheet.

Anie was in the act of making a feeble dash at an obstinate and intrusive bee, when Varian came up quickly behind her, and laid firm, friendly hands for an instant on her shoulders.

“How much more than jolly to find you here!” he exclaimed, throwing himself on the grass by the side of her chair. “Let me look at you. How did you sleep? Did they make you comfortable? Peetybee loves you already.” He clasped his knees with his hands, and looked her over carefully. Yes, the cheeks were a shade less pale, the violet smudges around the eyes less dark. It was working. He felt, at once, singularly boyish and happy, if not slightly silly. As

a matter of fact, in this mood, he was more than ever Van Dyck's Young Wharton.

Anie smiled at him. "Oh, Varian, your mother and the house! I have the lacquer dressing-room"—he nodded, as if he knew she would—"and Peetybee, and the garden, and this identical wicker chair, are the most delightfully good and comfortable *things*. I feel hundreds of miles away from London. But," sitting up and dragging her scant linen frock down to her ankles, "are you not down earlier than you expected to be? Oh, Varian, don't tell me that they forgot to send for me and that I have missed my luncheon! I am so hungry. I could eat this—parasol. You see, it is just the colour of lettuce."

They laughed with the happy ease of youth. Varian jumped up, gathered together her belongings, sniffing at the basket of heliotrope, so that Anie gave him her own particular spray. He said it was all the better for being undeniably and shamelessly wilted.

"You behold in me," he announced, "the messenger Peetybee promised you when luncheon should begin to loom large upon the domestic horizon. They told me an *hors d'œuvre* had been signalled as I came in. How jolly it is to have you here with mother!"

Varian's vocabulary dwindled when he became emotional, as he was apt to when he looked at Anie, but his tone and his glance provided all the commentary necessary.

The little lady evidently thought so, not being a great talker herself. They snipped roses recklessly on the way to the house, because Varian said they were lovely in her arms against her blue frock, so obedient Anie

clasped a soft, fragrant, somewhat prickly pink mass upon her breast in order to please his eye.

"Look, Bee, there they come," said Gita, standing on the terrace, dressed in some cream-coloured stuff, all delicate loops and drooping folds and embroidered scallops, in a mode quite peculiar to herself, but very graceful and becoming.

"How are you, dear? Ready for something to eat? You slept? You were comfortable? Page wasn't too stupid and countrified?" She moved forward with her languid step to hold the girl's chin lightly in her cool fingers, smiling at her with soft, dark, myopic eyes. Varian put his arm around his mother, and the three stood thus linked for a moment.

"I have been telling Varian how beautiful everything is, and how sweet you are to me. In London—" the girl drew a long breath of relief—"I felt as if I were attaced to a wire, that some horrid ogre jiggled and twiddled till I danced to his tune. But here, in this lovely garden, where it is so quiet, with nothing but roses and bees, I feel as if I could go to sleep so happily for a hundred years."

They had been moving slowly in the direction of the house while Anie was speaking, and now Varian and his mother exchanged a glance of *camaraderie* over her innocent head. Gita was pleased that her boy's little plot was succeeding so well, and Varian's heart seemed, as it beat, to melt into myriad-coloured dancing waves that would give you that choky feeling in your throat, if you let them wash up too high.

Bee marched them into the breakfast-room, wishing that she could express her pleasure in her boy's early

arrival by the fabrication of some astounding dish. But it was too late for that now. Nevertheless, one did not get such strawberries every day. She threw a satisfied glance at their grotesquely swollen forms on their cushion of bright leaves, in their sumptuous Venetian *barca*.

"Let us take our fruit in the Green Saloon," said Gita, when the more workmanlike portion of the meal had been disposed of. "One becomes so tired of sitting up straight. You may smoke, Varian. Does Anie?"

"Oh, no; mamma and Estelle do, but it makes my lips puff up, and I really do not care for it. Do you, Gita?"

"Occasionally, when I have a headache."

Varian settled his mother on her sofa with its large, pale pomegranate silk cushions. Her fragile figure, half-submerged in its cream batiste, had the effect of some ailing or wounded bird, lying there in its white ruffled plumage.

Varian kissed her hand. Peetybee had disappeared on some dark, domestic errand of her own, and Anie wandered about the room, examining the little green parrots that clawed their fantastic way up the wall-paper, reappearing again, but subdued, de-parrotized, as it were, in the pattern of the hangings.

"How is the Simone Martini coming on?" inquired Gita.

Varian wrinkled a placid brow. "Rather scrubbily. It is awfully hard digging. Fortescue put us on the trail, but there is next to nothing to go on. We don't even know the little man's name, so we call him Martini β , like a submarine. But his work is certainly there.

You catch his touch every once and a while, oh, unmistakably. He was very personal, with curious little tricks that Martini never had. For one thing, you notice the extraordinary way he saw and painted heels. He may have had an odd one himself—— ”

“ And people teased him about it,” suggested Anie, sidling up to lean on the back of Gita’s sofa. “ I know about that myself, for everyone says my heels are too small—horrid, bootmaker people, I mean.”

“ Martini β would have pleased them then,” returned Varian, “ for his are always too big. He paints them, in profile, with a straight, almost square protuberance. But it places him, by Jove.”

“ This new method of detective criticism that you young people are launched on bristles with pitfalls, it seems to me,” said his mother. “ You build up a most imposing scaffolding on the flimsiest of foundations, and we ignorant ones are supposed to stand about, moonstruck, open-mouthed, and swallow you whole. Indigestible, stony morsels you make sometimes, I must confess. Is this what they want in London, this Frankensteinlike fabrication of an ancient Siennese, who, doubtless, never existed save in Rossiter Fortescue’s restless brain? I should like to take all you over-subtle young men and bury you—oh, not together, for you would talk interminably—but separately in some tiny Apennine villages I know of, to live as the peasants, to dig in that rich, old earth, to breathe that golden air, to eat that coarse food—— ”

“ Garlic!” murmured Varian, with a tragic gesture, “ O thou Spartan mother!”

“ —and to throw yourself on your back at night, too

healthily tired and beaten to spin theories. After six months of that you would have a glimpse of the true, living Italy—the same that bred Martini, and then, perhaps, your criticism would be human, vital, vigorous, blood-filled, not the anæmic, microscopic, patient, piddling, antlike kind of the present day.”

Gita, interested in her theme, smiling, animated, raised herself on her pillows to find her hands imprisoned in Varian’s, his eager young face close to hers.

“Bravo, *maman*, you did that splendidly. Now will you kindly be so good as to tell me where you stole your thunder? What Olympian, in other words, has been tearing Rossiter up the back? The hounds of winter are on spring’s traces—that plays the deuce with the metre, but makes my meaning clear—those old wintry—*spanies* the ‘Friday Review’ keeps chained up in its editorial office to snap and yap at our young champion who goes out a-tilting with vine-leaves in his hair. Fortescue for ever! What have you been reading? Confess! You know you were the dearest, most interested little person last week when I told you about the work, and now—before Anie, too, by Jove!—you let fly a deadly dart at your only son. Where, oh where is that ‘Friday Review’? I could swear they have been at it again. Come, be a woman, confess!”

Rosy, laughing like a girl, Gita parries his arms, only to fall into them at last.

“Oh, my child, how you make your old mother’s heart beat! Perhaps I may as well tell you that Blackfoot has, as it happens, a little notice in the ‘Review’——”

“Ha, ha, so it’s he, is it—that ancient, hoary man? Speak up, *cara mia*, do you believe in your Varian again?”

How charming they were together, thought poor Anie, a forlorn little beggar at love’s gates. A crushing nostalgia came over her, for a mother’s arms like Gita’s, a brother’s arms like Varian’s. She resolutely shut out what Ambry’s arms might have been. She could not bear that yet. Would they never look at her? A little more and a tear would run down her nose, she felt sure. As she slipped away from behind the sofa, Varian, catching her eye, noted the droop of the young shoulders, the significance of that bent head.

Heavens, what a fool he had been making of himself! Poor child, she was very sore still, and must be tended, oh, so gently. He would have liked, in pure brotherliness, to put his cheek against hers. She needed petting. He must see that she got it somewhere. Here Gita began to use some motherly intuition. Snuggling her slender body deeper into the wide, old sofa, she made a soft nest in front of her, within the scope of her arms, to which she drew the small, forlorn, blue figure that had wandered off to recommence a rather blurred examination of those hateful parrots.

“Come here, Anie dear, I want to look at you. Sit down. See, I have made heaps of room.” She pulled the girl gently to her and clasped her hands around her waist. Varian sat on a stool and smiled at her. So little Anie became warm and almost happy again, expanding in the deep, fresh, tranquil atmos-

phere in which these two, this mother and son, had their spiritual being.

"Mother, tell us what we are to play at this afternoon, Anie and I," began Varian, twiddling a scallop of his parent's gown.

"So I have two babes on my hands to amuse, have I? We must consult your Peetybee, who is a mine of information as to innocent sports. Do you want the car?"

Anie made a little face.

"So that's settled. She won't play that," said Varian. "What next? Tennis would tire her small chest, and——"

Anie leaned forward with her hair in her eyes, looking amazingly like the child who used to hang around him at Crops, with her stick of an arm hooked in his, and her general leggy look of a young colt.

"Did you think of Crops, then, Varian?" said she.

"I did, but how did you know?"

"Because I saw in your eye that you were saying to yourself—'Years ago, at Crops, I used to go out to a green bench in the thicket in the garden with some big, wise book, and out of it I used to read—oh, for hours—to the quietest, the most intelligent of little girls'—which was—*me!*'" ended Anie triumphantly.

Gita squeezed her gently and laughed. "There you are, Varian. She has settled it for herself. Take cushions out to the cedars. That is the best spot for the early afternoon. The chairs are already there. Then at four, or half-past, come round to the Bois, where tea and Bee and I will be awaiting you."

"Won't you come with us now?" asked Anie, "or must you lie down?"

"Oh, no, but I have a thousand odd little ravellings to pick up, and a regiment of unanswered letters is manœuvring all over my writing-table——"

"She does not love us, Anie," remarked Varian solemnly, getting to his feet. "You were the shocked young female spectator only a few moments ago of how she turned on me—O savage mamma! We won't whine for her favours, not we. What shall the book be? You choose. Something venerable, and not too exciting, please, so that you will feel like interrupting in the middle of every page to talk to me. I enjoy being talked to. Come, speak out!" He menaced, with a would-be ferocious eye, the pretty entwined pair on the sofa.

"Tell me something, Gita," urged Anie.

"Ah, yes, that reminds me," replied Gita. "Varian, hand me that package on the table. No, the one behind the screen. This is something that Raoul has just sent over from Paris—a *catalogue raisonné* of some Japanese drawings, eighteenth century. See, they are really quite charming. Would that amuse you?" looking up at her children standing obediently in front of her.

"The very thing," said Anie, while Varian tucked the book under his arm. "*A bientôt, maman*," kissing her hand.

"Oh, wait one moment," cried Gita, as they reach the door. "Anie dear, do you remember that we meant to tell Varian of that delightful milk-and-cream shop arranged so beautifully, the eggs in their little plaited baskets, all of it so fresh and sweet?"

“When did you see it?”

“When Anie and I were leaving Belgrave Square yesterday afternoon. But what was the name of the street?”

“It was some title, wasn’t it, Gita?”

“Oh, yes, Countess—Countess Street. Do you happen to know it, Varian?”

“Vaguely, I think. I have patrolled that neighbourhood rather thoroughly at one time and another. But what am I to do with the shop? Go in and buy an egg to eat with my tea?”

“You must hunt it up,” said Anie, “because in the back windows—it is a little house, you know—there are such odd curtains, and I saw a very pretty woman waiting on the shop. We are sure it is not an ordinary place at all.”

“So I am to go to Countess Street, ogle the curtains from across the road, and the fair dairymaid at closer quarters——”

“Exactly,” said his mother, “and, to break the ice, you are to say that you have a foolish little parent whose extraordinary cows give more excellent milk than she knows what to do with, and that you are on the look-out for a philanthropic and intelligent dairymaid (here, I leave it to you to intimate that you see before you the embodiment of this ideal), who, for a consideration, will receive our daily surplus and dole it out to deserving, poor, skinny, unwholesome London cats, and to the same type of underfed babes of the neighbourhood. What do you think of that for a scheme?”

“Ripping, really,” cried Varian. “I’ll hunt the place up the moment I reach town. It may seem a

trifle irregular on closer inspection, but that makes it only the more engaging. Anie, the cedars yawn for us." This time they got clear.

"No, I shall hold it on my knees. It is too heavy for you."

"But, Varian, it can rest perfectly on my lap. I won't feel it at all, because I am practically lying down. Please!" Thus they gently squabbled. It ended, of course, in the triumph of the little lady. The large, fair pages lay outspread on the blue linen lap. Varian, on the grass by her side, leaned over to turn each sheet with a masterful finger at the proper time.

They were too much occupied with the drawings to pay any attention to the text, and no wonder, for Utamaro knows how to keep your eye. On those strips of thick, dunnish paper, his fair, Japanese women, with the blocked, black masses of their dressed heads, make their simple little gestures so absolutely true to themselves and to their environment that they become types, or ideas, of all such movements. There are scenes in the open air, where women bathe, or fish, or boat, their gracious silhouettes relieved against a pattern of poles or mooring-posts, against the spread of nets, or some complication of masts and rigging. An autumnal scene shows the gathering of, say, quinces. How the arms of the women raised to catch the fruit compose with the trellislike branches of the trees! In some of these little figures there is the true feeling of the eighteenth century, as it expressed itself in Europe—the same delicate, powdery, frivolous charm hangs about this oriental lover and his lady, stepping daintily in a

winter garden, the snow weighting the top of their coquettish paper parasol, as about that scene on the frozen canal at Versailles where a courtier in satin pushes a sled with its pretty silken burden.

So they looked and laughed, and wondered and talked, forgetting the book, forgetting the garden, but feeling intensely conscious of each other—Anie, with the gratitude of a lost child whose little cold fingers are gathered into a strong, warm hand, whose weary young body is lifted high against a broad, protecting shoulder; Varian, with the sudden knowledge that the wave of chivalrous pity that had driven him to Gordon Square was changing, had changed, into the deep-flowing, full tide that beat impetuously with every pulsation of his heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A WEEK later Countess Street was drowsing under the heavy advances of the July sun, in that dead hour of the day just before four o'clock. The small boy in the knitted suit, the only person in sight, was playing a feeble game with a languid, underfed puppy whose too-long tail had a discouraging, congenital, mongrel tendency to droop between his sallow legs. Columbine's shop on the corner, with its green awning, dappled with the shadow of the street's solitary plane, whenever a puff of wandering air set its large, loose leaves in motion, with its door open for freshness, with its jars of sweet peas and spiky larkspur, was an irresistible invitation to the passer-by to loiter, to look, to enter, to fall a victim to a cream cheese, say, because you could slip that rather sheepishly into your pocket, not to a flagon of that wonderful milk, simply because you couldn't get that into any pocket made for the modern man—sheepishly or otherwise. The frank, free, healthy, quite brazen influence of the little shop was such that you desired to possess yourself, at first sight, of everything in it.

It struck Varian in exactly this way, when, turning into Countess Street this afternoon, from the other end, he caught the bright spot made in the hot, deserted street by the clear paint, the green awning, the rustling plane, the jugs of flowers, and the cool, dim interior beyond the open door. This was manifestly what he

was in search of. London could not afford two of them. Before he went in, he admired the excellent display of neat baskets overflowing with large, clean eggs, or with tiny, linen-swathed cheeses, the jars and bowls of milk and cream, the pats of butter, fresh as cowslips, the flowers, the few monstrous strawberries in their nest of leaves, that he felt must have been introduced solely for their colour, since painters will tell you how a dab of crimson can be made to speak—sometimes to beat the big drum—plump in the middle of your otherwise undistinguished canvas. Varian stood and gazed and smiled to himself, thinking of Anie and of his mother, and of their original philanthropic scheme that he was about to father.

Inside, the little shop was spotless but deserted, with its broad, white, laden shelves that ran around the walls, its miniature counter with its sparkling scales and its piles of thin paper to wrap up purchases, its mounds of miniature bags—to hold an egg, for instance. The knitted boy was never sent for more than one at a time, and, if half a one had been a marketable commodity, he would doubtless have lisped a request for that, looking up at the kind, pretty, motherly Bina with his big, fatigued eyes.

Varian took it all in quietly for a moment. Perhaps when the door was closed a warning bell tinkled your advent. He thought he caught voices and laughter—such a clear bell-note! (real tradespeople could not possibly produce it)—from the room that lay behind the one in which he stood. A morsel of glass had been let into a panel of the door, on a level with the normal eye. He made a discreet clatter with his stick. Then

he heard a man's pleasant voice say quite distinctly: "Let me go. You will burn your fingers. Gently! the brute is red-hot." Then a low murmur that he could not catch. The man's voice again: "My dear girl, do you suppose I can't sell an egg or a bit of cheese or a ha'penny'sworth of milk? Listen, and you will get an idea of how the thing ought really to be done." Again the low, happy laughter, as the door was pulled open with a quick turn of that well-shaped brown hand, and Quin advanced, carrying his tall, slender, perfectly-proportioned body with the rippling rhythm in every line that betrays unceasing training as it is understood by the artist and the expert.

Varian knew him instantly. When you have been privileged to meet Harlequin, even for a moment, *incognito*, you are not likely to forget the fact.

"How do you do? I blessed you for that match."

Quin was as ready as Varian. He had a delightful little internal throb as the cloud-current broke from its artificial restraints. What happy chance could have brought the boy here?

"It is a pleasure to help a fellow-smoker in distress. You have a good eye. If I recollect aright, the last time we met I was unrecognizably submerged, I should have supposed, in my humble bath-towelling. How did you know me again, and in this *milieu*?" Quin cast an amused and comprehensive glance at the serried ranks of dairy products that hemmed them in on every side.

"Oh, when a fellow has a figure like yours," returned Varian admiringly, "he can't disguise it. But—but the—what you were doing before——"

“Don’t try to spare my feelings,” interrupted Quin with a friendly smile. “The long tramps with the sandwich-board have had their day, and now the time has come for something else. He broke off with a gesture that dismissed the subject. “Did you perhaps come in to buy something, unlikely as that seems?”

Varian smiled. “Everything looks so very nice, I would like to loot the whole shop. I had no idea there was such a place as this to be met with in London. In fact, my mother saw it one day, and was so taken with it, and with a scheme of her own as a corollary, that she asked me to look it up. Do I understand that you run it?”

“Not exactly, but it is a family affair. The daughter of my friend Panta is the presiding genius. You may note her special touch. She really knows more about life in general, and the best ways to meet those semi-catastrophes with which the most uneventful day is beset, than her father and I rolled together. As she is the motive-power of the whole affair, had you not better talk to her? I conceive her at this moment in an agony of curiosity as to what, in heaven’s name, we are about. When you came in, you represented to us simply the prospective purchaser of an egg or two, or a drop of milk. But you see how the situation has developed—one moment!” and Quin disappeared.

“How delightfully strange!” cried Bina, her eyes alight at Quin’s hurried explanation. “It looks as if the cloud-current really meant us to be something in his life. We must ask him in. Perhaps he hasn’t had his tea yet.”

“Will you come in here?” said a soft voice, and

Varian wheeled to face Bina's airy shape, to receive a vivid and instantaneous impression of a flexible, light young figure, of coils and spirals and vinelike tendrils of ruddy chestnut hair, of large, clear, dark eyes that seemed to radiate an innocent, warm, friendly hospitality.

Varian smiled, and followed her with alacrity into the pleasant precincts of the sitting-room, with its ancient, wide-armed chairs, its broad, deep hearth, its cupboards, and its curtains on which strange birds stalked. That must have been what had caught Anie's eye. Varian felt a shade of awkwardness for a moment as these charming-looking but extraordinary people regarded him with the marked, almost inquiring interest of old friends who knew him well, and who were mutually asking, after some interval of absence, how he did. It was distinctly curious, but the effect wore off almost at once, as Quin took his hat and stick, and Bina recommended the deep recess of a wicker chair, because you slid so awfully on the leather cushions of the other one.

Deftly, without haste, the little table became spread for tea, the delicate cups and plates appeared from their dim cupboard confinement, the spirit-lamp did its manifest duty without snorting or spluttering, and presently the quite particular aroma of Bina's tea floated out caressingly as she poised the pot.

"It is the oddest thing," said Varian, settling himself as deep as he would go in his capacious chair, refusing, with pain, his fourth cup of tea, "but you two people remind me in the most tantalizing way of some group, some picture that eludes me. I seem to

see you dancing, or just resting from a dance. It is all smoky, and vague, and dim. There are lights, but it is in the open air, in a garden, or on a stage in a garden. By Jove," turning to Quin, "you have on the most extraordinary costume."

"I seem to run to that sort of thing. Do you recollect my rakish fez?"

"Rather, but you are very swagger here in darkish tights, chequered with red and black diamond shapes, or is it red and yellow? You have on a bit of a masque, and a line of white shows at your ankle, just above your flat, shiny pumps."

"It might be Harlequin," said Quin, with a whimsical lift of his eyebrow.

"Exactly. But what the deuce has Harlequin to do with it?" Varian wondered aloud.

"To do with what?" asked Quin softly, fixing his guest with quiet, deep, impelling eyes. The story was coming out.

"Will you think me quite mad if I tell you——"

"Oh, no, we never do," declared Bina, highly interested, with the air of one to whom bloody and mysterious secrets were confided daily.

"A week or so ago," began Varian, "I was in great trouble and difficulty about a friend's affairs. It was a delicate matter, and I was on the point of throwing up the whole thing, when suddenly, right there before me, in the morning, in a room with the sun streaming in, I had a distinct vision of something that didn't exist."

"Something—creepy?" asked Bina yearningly.

"Not a bit in itself. But how the deuce do such

things happen? I saw—someone, the friend whose affairs were troubling me, as she was years ago, as a child. But the strangest part is yet to come, the strangest in view of the fact that by the merest accident I should be sitting here with you talking and taking tea. For, in this vision of my friend, you two people certainly appeared also, you,” looking at Quin, “exactly, definitely, as you are at this moment, but in that eccentric costume I described. Miss Panta was vaguer, mistier, in white, with a bluish wrap or mantle.”

“I’m glad I was in it,” hazarded Bina.

“So am I,” declared Varian. He certainly had a delightfully boyish air. “The fact remains that some subconscious chord in me was jerked by you two good people, idly, involuntarily on your part, but just at the right moment. We had to meet, you see. I felt the tug as I turned into Countess Street this afternoon. You lead me into this cosy room and feed me with the most delicious things, with never a question as to what the dickens I’m here for anyway!”

“Ah, two minutes of talk, the glance of an eye, or the brush of an elbow has been enough to put us *en rapport*, to make us aware of a certain affinity, much deeper than anything physical, that tells us we speak the same secret tongue, are made free of the same sacred mysteries.”

Quin bent his kindly eye upon their young guest, who was confusedly conscious that this was unusual talk for a room-back-of-the-shop. He was immensely interested, however, and did not care if he showed it.

“That day in Oxford Street,” continued Quin, “the

day of the Adventure of the Match, you told me, unconsciously, that we should have things to say to each other, should we ever meet, messages to send and to receive. You reinforce this perhaps rather nebulous conviction by the account of the part Bina and I played in your vision. It shows that we, drawn by who shall say what currents of sympathy, lying far beyond the probe of any psychical examiner, lent you aid and comfort at a moment of indecision. You are by way of being a sensitive yourself, or you would never have seen our 'reflection.' We, for our part, were quite unconscious at the time that we were appearing in—where was the room in question, may I ask? ”

“ In Wilton Place.”

“ So that morning you were enabled to see us in Wilton Place, when, as a mere matter of physical presence, Bina was tending shop, and I trundling my sandwich-board. Some master hand jerked our strings that day beyond a doubt.”

“ We must simply wait and see what will come of it,” concluded Bina, practical ever, with the wisest little housewifely smile.

“ So far, at least, a most agreeable hour of talk for me,” said Varian, looking from one to the other. “ I hope it won't be the last. You know I live rather near you, in Cambridge Street. We might meet sometimes, if you cared to look me up. One doesn't so often run across such manifest 'sympathetics' as we are. I ought to have a card on me somewhere. Yes, here is an exceedingly messy one.” He rose. “ Good heavens, I was on the point of wandering off without telling you why I am here.” They all laughed.

"Do sit down again," begged Bina. "I am dying to know, but am too polite to ask."

"It is childishly simple. My mother has a place at Wimbledon. It contains everything that can minister to the comfort of man, including three excellent cows. Now there seems to be a limit to the amount of milk one's household can consume, and upon seeing this charming shop of yours a week or so ago—she was too late and too occupied to stop and explain her scheme to you then—she was seized with the idea of sending in the surplus from her dairy, begging you to dole it out to the poor babies and pussy-cats of the neighbourhood. What do you say to the suggestion? Is it too grotesquely impracticable? Would it bore or trouble you?" Varian fixed Bina with his most engagingly anxious look. She played up at once.

"Indeed, it would give me great pleasure to help your mother, especially as she will find the ground well broken. I have already a number of unofficial little *pensionnaires* in the neighbourhood—four-footed ones, too, and with this Wimbledon milk I can regularly serve a shelter for poor women and their babies, not far from here, in Horsham Ground. It is run as a semi-private offshoot from the big Neighbourhood House in Ridges Street by such a sweet woman, a Miss Johnstone-Ford—thin as a reed, and so pale and jerky you want to feed her up with eggs and cream. She needs it more than the big, coarse, slatternly wrecks who hang to her skimpy little skirts."

You instantly had a vision of pretty Bina, as a stern but just Bona Dea, dispensing the bland fruits of the home farm, but putting up with no nonsense, you may

be sure, from frail Miss Johnstone-Ford's riotous flock.

"How very jolly," breathed Varian with relief. "So we may consider that as settled. You are quite sure it won't bother you in the least?" Bina shook her head.

"Mother will be so pleased," went on Varian, "she will want to meet you. May she, some time, when she is next in town? I could bring her. We are already friends enough for that, not to wait on ceremony?"

They went well together, these two, Bina and Varian, standing quite near each other, their eyes full of the rather vivid interest and pleasure their unconventional meeting had aroused. Yes, they certainly "composed," thought Quin rather grimly, suddenly feeling flat and tired. Heavens, what an old fool he was, becoming more and more Cubical every day, with his uneasy—no, he couldn't call it jealousy—with his uneasy anxiety as to Bina and every person not actually doddering with whom she exchanged a word.

"Good-bye and thank you most awfully," Varian held out a frank hand, that, as Quin grasped it, sent to his brain-quick, cloudy tremors from the boy's most intimate life. But, being on this new, friendly footing with the lad, he refused to register them, and they sank away again into those dim, lost undercurrents of the soul.

"Oh, by the way, shall we send the milk here, or would it be simpler to forward it directly to the shelter?" asked Varian as a parting shot.

"No, here, please. That will be easier. Good-bye." Bina followed him with bright, friendly eyes as he made his way out of the shop.

"Oh, I do like your Varian," she exclaimed, coming back to stand in front of Quin, as he leaned on the mantelpiece. "He is so simple, and yet his eyes show that he could be as complex as need be, as careful and subtle as he was in the Ambry affair. It is good to meet people like that sometimes, isn't it, Quin?"

The latter gave but a languid assent, then roused himself.

"I like the boy immensely. Shall we see anything more of him, I wonder?"

"Oh, yes, he will bring his mother, I feel sure. But, Quin, how about your cloud-current? Now that we really know him, on this footing, isn't it very awkward for you to read his thoughts?"

"It would be damnable, my dear child, quite damnable to do so. Luckily—or is it unluckily? I don't know—I have become so deucedly Cubical in the last few years, more and more so since we left Italy and settled down here in England—in fact, I think we all have—that I can now, at will, disregard the messages that importune me from this or that chance meeting. By so doing, by keeping the door fast in their faces, I save myself from peeking and prying. When I shook the boy's hand a moment ago I was, for an instant, submerged in his personality—I could have read him more deeply, more clearly than he will ever know himself. But I shut off the current, and it ebbed and sank down into the vast dynamo whence it sprang. Years ago I did not have this negative power. I gloried in my cloud-heritage, in the gifts and marks of our peculiar race. I bathed triumphantly in the full flood of the amazing force that swept through me, taking me off

my feet, in my contact with these Cubical men and women. I could no more then have regulated their messages, as I do now—could no more have avoided the startling revelations of their inmost being, vivid as lightning, photographic in their sharpness—than I could have prevented myself from receiving them in the first place. But we change, we grow old, we grow Cubical.”

Quin looked at himself in the shabby mirror, then back again gratefully to the fairer, clearer one of Bina’s eyes. That young person appeared momentarily dashed. Quin had not been himself lately—not the brave, gay, intrepid mixture of comrade, playfellow, and guardian to which the years had accustomed her.

“Are you so tired to-day, Quin?” she asked in a small voice, seeking, womanlike, a physical explanation (it is always so much safer) for the impression he gave her of indefinite *malaise*. “You have been working too hard at that old gymnasium.”

“Not a bit of it,” cried Quin, mentally shaking himself savagely. Why must he worry that happy nature with his whims? “It is rather good sport sometimes making old Heffendorfer’s eyes pop. One isn’t Harlequin for nothing, eh?” Quin fell into one of his old, easy, graceful, inimitable postures, and stood poised for a moment with winged ankles, as though waiting for the first gay throb of the carnival music. Bina clapped her hands. The shadow had passed off for this time.

“Oh, do dance!” she begged.

“Ah, not now. I really am a bit stiff—and after such a tea! Do you want to kill me? By the way,

where is Panta? He roameth far. To be sure we had tea earlier to-day, didn't we?"

"Yes, because of Varian. Wouldn't it be jolly if his mother were to bring in the little Anie? If I could see her, I think their story would be clearer."

Quin, with a restless desire to get away from the whole subject, suddenly bethought himself of "The Immortal Gymnast" languishing in Panta's chair. He fumbled for the book and drew it out of its recess.

"Has Panta finished this yet?"

"Oh, no, he keeps going back to the beginning, and starting all over again. He says you must do that with anything deep, so as to get your sea-legs."

Quin made a wry face as he settled himself to the task, opening the book in the middle and boldly commencing to read with the hardihood of inexperience.

Bina laid the table afresh for poor, tired Panta, when he should drift in, and then sat down in her little chair with a formidable list of bills and accounts, checking them up briskly, with a deft exactitude.

A quiet half-hour ebbed away before Quin began to show signs of returning animation. Then he looked up, beat his book upon his knee, and fixed Bina with a humorous eye.

"This old fellow has certainly struck out a vein of his own," he said. "Let me read you this." Bina stood it as long as she could, then she burst out:

"Oh, stop a moment, Quin, till I catch my breath. I am not sure that I understand all you have been saying, but this much I know—it is a doctrine of despair, wiping all meaning out of life—calling it horrid names into the bargain—'jarred,' 'secondary,' 'out of tune.'"

Why, it is pure Nihilism. If we believed that old man, where should we ever gather the strength to face each new day? If we considered that this miserable little 'I' of ours was the only thing that mattered, we should become the most pagan, savage brutes. Where would unselfishness and pity and loving-kindness come in? Why, the whole meaning would go out of life like a shot. I don't like that book at all." Bina slapped her accounts down on the table, and turned an animated, combative face in Quin's direction.

"Your remarks do credit to your heart, my child," replied Quin with mock gravity, "but you have committed the unpardonable sin—natural, however, as all sin is considered to be by the judicious—the unpardonable sin, I say, of dragging ethics into a philosophic discussion. It is tempting, I confess, but, believe me, it won't do. Now, as to the theory's nihilistic tendencies, on which you put your small finger at once, the author admits them himself with disarming frankness. He practically says that his work is for the perusal and acceptance of the 'Priests of Egypt' only—the hopeless sceptics—the poor, tired, world-weary, battered and worn men of parts. He can have no message for the young, the healthy, the happy. He even narrows it down to a matter of circulation, when he says that the mystic, the idealist, is not a full-blooded person. There you have it in a nutshell. You could explode his precious theory in the market-place, and, I wager you, there would be the most discouraging trickle of smoke and no bang to speak of. The man in the street now finds a pragmatic sanction for everything he does, or wishes to do, and that is enough for him."

"I still contend that your old philosopher would be a dangerous person to have around," protested Bina. "His scheme takes all the light, and colour, and—smell out of life. It makes it seem dull and papery, like scenery. I feel that depression sometimes in reading novels. All the exciting experiences of the people in the book can have only a kind of secondary meaning for me—all these amusing, interesting, or painful things are so simply in relation to the characters, not as happening to me at first-hand, as a living person. Now your old man would reduce my real, own, true, everyday life to just this dim, weak, twilight existence of half-tones and shadowy reactions. I refuse to have anything to do with it."

"Ah, my dear, thank God you need not." Quin closed the book carefully and tucked it away again. "He is not for the young or the beautiful, the happy, the gay, the free. Not for the Binas of this life does he weave his spidery chain!"

CHAPTER NINE

AS they spoke, the lovely evening light began to steal moist, powdery, gold fingers between the half-drawn curtains, dripping over dim, shadowy spots in the old flooring, heightening the darkish polish of the worn mahogany, lingering with a vanishing brightness on the warm, ruffled top of Bina's head, beckoning to all sensitive souls, house-bound at this magic moment, to come out helter-skelter, hand in hand, hatless, breathless, slippered feet in the long, wet grass—only to come out, to hunt and find, across the yellow fields, beyond the farthest bronze-green glimmer of the waving forest-ride that pot of gold the sun is always too drowsy and heavy to carry with him as he sinks into his yawning West.

Quin sprang up suddenly. "Oh, I say, you know, Bina, this evening is too heavenly. What a stretch for our legs, what sights to see, what streets to importune! Isn't this Mrs. Ruggles' day to clean up? Couldn't she tend shop at this *morte saison* while you and I take a frisk?"

This was so much like the old, irresponsible Quin that Bina wavered. "Do you think it would be quite safe? Rug-Pug is such a fool. Could she do it, do you think? Panta must surely be in from moment to moment now. I should love to go. It seems ages since we have had a walk together."

“Up and away then, be our word. Shall I fetch your hat?”

“No, I must run up and drag down Rug-Pug. I shan’t be a moment.”

A trifle breathless they set out, just in the mood for adventure. Happily they met Panta at the end of the street—a weary, rumpled Panta, who made the liveliest pantomime, as of one overcome with surprise, when he saw them. He had been belated, it appeared, at his old trick of fingering books in Tottenham Court Road, where, waking up, he found himself to his dismay devoid of anything in the nature of coin of the realm (“Oh, naughty, careless old man!” interjected Bina), so he had been forced to foot it, bookless and tealess, half across London.

They were so gay and slightly foolish at the prospect of their little expedition that, extremes readily meeting, they would have mingled their tears with his, had he given them the opening. As it was, he merely showed a touching solicitude as to what had been left out for his tea, brightening considerably at the mention of anchovy paste. He promised faithfully to back up Rug-Pug should she become embroiled with a possible customer, and waved them a jaunty farewell.

“I had an easy round with your gymnastic friend this afternoon,” called back Quin over his shoulder. “We were sparring for position.”

“He’s a dark one,” muttered Panta, wagging his head. “Take care!”

But the spell of the streets took them instead—this spell made up of movement, of scent, of colour, of darkness shot with light, of subtle emanations, of ob-

vious contacts, of fleeting snatches, of half-heard words; a matter of interruptions, of broken connexions, of eyes that invite, of gestures that rebuff, of things unfinished, of things never begun—that haunting, fatiguing, piquant mixture that envelops you as densely as a November fog, stinging your eyes, so that they open only the wider, the more eagerly; flicking you smartly on the cheek, so that the other may be the more readily turned; stealing with its curious, penetrating odour into your nostrils, so that hereafter no Arabian perfume can be sweet; sinking into and burning on your palate, so that no food less exciting can ever be savoury again. All this it does, and more, and Quin and Bina found themselves to-night in a mood to relish its magic.

They struck out in the direction of the park, walking slowly along the palings in Belgrave Square, so that Quin could point out the famous cream-coloured mansion that once housed unhappy little Anie until her young kinsman spirited her away to Wimbledon, where live and thrive those wonderful cows. There were lights behind the rows of dimly-shrouded windows, pinkish-reddish, as from shaded, glowing lamps.

“This is the time one would be dressing for late dinner, eh?” remarked Bina. “How long their days and nights must be!”

“Long, dull, and empty in reality, but very short, crammed, and exciting to the consciousness of these young men and young women, these Anies and Ambrys, who dash in vague circles every day, with as much intense, if undirected energy, as any small steam-machine, rushing off on its tiny track, without the guiding hand of its maker and engineer.”

"Our friend Varian is not like that, is he?" queried innocent Bina. "He works at something, doesn't he?"

Poor Quin had a sensation of goose-flesh at what he chose to consider her obvious interest.

"Oh, yes, he writes little art notices for the little magazines." He softened, when he saw that she did not resent his disparaging adjective. "Our Varian is refreshingly in earnest," he went on. "He will do something yet. Did it strike you that he meant it seriously when he asked me to look him up, or was it a mere *façon de parler*, born of gentle habits and the worthy desire to be agreeable?"

"Oh, I am quite sure he meant every word of it," cried Bina. "I could shake you sometimes, Quin. Don't you know that the moment a person looks at you he wants to know you? Can't you see how awfully, how most unusually attractive you are?"

A glow shot through poor Quin, raying out so richly, so ruddily, and so warmly that no goose-flesh could stand against it.

"My dear child, you rave," he said, but he was immensely pleased nevertheless.

"Then I'll go sometime to Cambridge Street," he continued with decision. "We can talk about Italy. What do you say to turning through Wilton Place? It will bring us out at Knightsbridge."

Bina obediently followed her leader, a dainty figure, with the airy, perfectly-balanced walk of the born dancer, a little black lace toque pinned on the shining coils of her hair that curled into a great roll on her neck, a cloudy scarf drooping from her shoulders, hanging

across her slender arms, over which she had pulled up the long, wrinkled tops of her gloves.

"Why should Wilton Place have so familiar a sound?" she openly wondered.

"Because Ambry lives there. It was in his rooms that Varian had his vision of us."

"To be sure. It is a pity my scarf isn't blue. Who is he, exactly?"

"Sir Ambry Nunholme, son of a deceased worthy baronet and of his widow who has married again. I'll tell you something that has just come to me. When I permitted myself to remain *en rapport* with Varian, I caught a number of flying cues, got hints of people who had influenced him, who had left their impress on him. Has your Miss Johnstone-Ford of the Shelter for Distressed Females and their Offspring by any chance a brother?"

"Of course she has. How odd of you to ask! He used to be something or other at Oxford, but he has gone into Socialism, and is the Secretary for some League, or Guild, or——"

"Well, he was Varian's tutor, Ambry's as well. See how the filaments of this affair catch our hands at every turn! We are in the same web too, busy, no doubt, in shooting out our gossamer strands, as invisible to us as to them."

At this moment the door of a house a few feet away was pulled open, letting out a gush of orange light upon the walk, and a harassed domestic appeared to blow a shrill blast upon a whistle. Before an answering rattle, bang, or gurgle could announce the arrival of the desired conveyance, a tall, fair youth in the

pied garb of evening, with floating cape and opera-hat, showed himself at the door with every mark of haste, waved the man out of the way with a high gesture of impatience, and started down the street at a pace sufficiently rapid and impetuous.

Coming abreast of our friends under the gas-lamp, the youth's attention was noticeably engaged, even to the slackening of his gait, by Bina's face under her filmy hat. Boldly his eyes spoke, unmistakably his blond, expressive masque showed the ready desire for adventure. "If he hadn't been in such a confounded hurry and if the little thing hadn't had that lanky dark chap with her——" A taxi rattling by, he dashed into it and was wafted away.

Quin looked after him sardonically, with ever so slight a stiffening of those steel-like muscles.

"What a horrid boy!" exclaimed Bina, without analysing her repulsion.

"*Voilà*, Ambry, my dear," replied Quin

"No?" Bina made the round O of astonishment.

"Yes."

"He is not nice."

"Oh, this is merely by the way. In his accustomed haunts he doubtless acts with more discretion. We caught him off his guard. He has undeniable charm. Also, to carry about that face and those shoulders is a distinct asset."

"What impression did you get as he passed us? There is no reason why you should disregard his current, is there?"

"Not in the least, so far. I shall suck him dry. I got the shock of an impetuous, turbulent nature, with

a curious undertow, one must confess, of a certain bitter sweetness, a certain heady attraction with a strong physical pull. It is difficult to explain, but I know enough now to understand what a poor, helpless little leaf such a girl as Anie would be, launched on the breast of such a spring-torrent. Ah, my dear, the mystery of all these personalities—selfish, ardent, hungering, devouring! Shall we turn? We might go down Sloane and around by Cadogan.”

They walked slowly, breathing the damp evening air, heavy, near the gardens, with the scent of the limes, or the slightly animal odour of the ailanthus. They felt vaguely, comfortably happy, because they were not thinking very hard of anything. They were together, alone, outside the daily atmosphere of the shop, in the relative silence of the evening streets, and that sufficed their languid senses for the moment.

All the world that uncoils a narrow, red carpet on its doorsteps and allows it to trickle down upon the walk whenever it has bidden guests to dine, seemed hispidly bent this night. How many crimson patches had they passed in just the length of this street? Broughams and motors with their great winking lamps made the queue before these decorated doors, discharging pretty ladies who pull their peacock cloaks about their white shoulders, agitating the strange, long, straight feathers it was the momentary mode to stick horizontally in their hair.

Bina, obviously taken with the sight, lagged behind. A motor urged its petrol-scented way along the winding lane of conveyances.

“Tell him to stop here,” cried a woman’s imperious,

impatient voice. "We can save time by walking a few steps. I must absolutely have two words with Lady Susan before we are sent in."

The motor stopped with a jerk, and the woman who had spoken opened the door precipitately with a fine, white, ungloved hand, hurriedly dragging her awkwardly scanty, primrose train—again the mode of the moment—across the pavement, huddling her violet and silver cloak over her large, bare, braceleted arms, carrying with a touch of natural arrogance her well-shaped head with its ironlike waves of rigidly undulated fairish hair, a frame, it may be said, that did nothing to soften that high-nosed, square-jawed countenance. In the wake of this meteoric lady, a young man emerged from the car with a kind of sulky nonchalance, as though to stamp her haste with the proper amount of disapprobation.

"Ambry!" murmured Bina under her breath, with a finger's pressure on Quin's arm.

The next to descend was a tall girl, brilliant, warm-coloured, glowing, with an abnormally long heron's feather audaciously stuck in the rich, unruly web of her hair, the thin, pale satin of her narrow gown as revealing as Tanagra gauze.

"Your mother, you know—" Ambry grumbled in her ear.

"What is that to you?" she demanded. "It gives us a moment to ourselves." She seized his arm to steady herself on her high, pointed heels. They were almost of a height, these two, he scarcely topping her by an inch. She continued to hold him, as they made their leisurely way into the lighted, palm-set doorway,

their voices dying into a murmur Bina ceased to catch.

When they got clear of the carpets, the lights, and the footmen, and had set their course for home, Quin remarked:

"That's the storm-cloud on the horizon."

"Where? Is it going to rain?" cried Bina, thinking tenderly of her little lacy hat.

"Lord, no, what a child! I was back with our dinner acquaintances, Ambry and the dark young woman. She is the cloud that will overtake and submerge that young man—a dripping and slightly unwilling captive, I imagine. She is Estelle, you know."

"Oh, Quin, how can I know? You forget that I am quite in the dark. You mean that she is Anie's sister? Then the hard, heavily-ironed lady must be their mother, and Varian's—what?"

"His mother's half-sister."

"How complicated!"

"It sounds worse than it is. What a tale we shall have to pop Panta's eyes with to-night!"

"Must we tell him? Let us keep this for our very own—this Ambry-Estelle part. That shall be a little secret linked with this walk of ours. We'll give him Varian and the milk of the three cows—but not this. Eh?"

That teasing Bina took his arm, and looked up smiling into her friend's dark face. What secret would he not have shared with her, having in his ears that intoxicating reiteration of those unmistakable pronouns, "us," "our," "we," with which her plea had been liberally sown?

So it was agreed. They found Panta dozing at his

little table, covered with the fragments of an Homeric tea. It seemed that Rug-Pug had done well, having sold a slice of cheese and two eggs, actually making change for the same.

“I told you so!” proclaimed a triumphant Quin.

There is always someone in a family you can count on for that classic phrase, and Bina—such a shining-eyed Bina, fresh and cool-cheeked from the damp summer air—did not let him forget that fact.

CHAPTER TEN

VARIAN, for the third time that morning, took from an inner pocket his mother's letter and spread the thick sheets upon the bundle of proofs, damp from the press, that he had not yet sorted.

There was some mention of Anie on every page: Anie was a dear; Anie loved the garden and the roses; Anie was reading Sir Thomas Browne; Anie played a mild game of cribbage with Bee, who was her spaniel and her slave, she, his mother, receiving no more attentions from that quarter; Anie was looking forward with the prettiest show of impatience to his coming on Saturday; Anie—so the pleasant summer-song went on, painting dream-pictures for his half-closed eyes, pictures in which the same little figure, splashed with sunlight in her garden hours, or moon-dappled in the quiet light of evening, held his eye in the very centre of each shifting, cloudy square. He pulled himself up. Did the good mother suspect? Was she giving her boy the sugar-plums she knew he craved? Never a line from Anie herself. Good Lord, how could he expect her to write! She had been quite mad about Ambry, that care-free scapegrace, and a sensitive girl couldn't pull her slender little tortured limbs out of such a trap and forget the pain and the shame in a matter of a week or so. But, as the days went on, so, alas, went alarmingly, degree by degree, his interest in Martini β . He

really must pull himself together; he was acting like a fool. He hadn't a leg to stand on. It must be the weather. So the bundle of proofs was torn open impatiently, and for two hours or so the blue pencil dipped and wavered, crossed, recrossed, checked, starred, and dotted, desperately bent upon proving that he was a devil of a fellow and that no weaknesses ever escaped *him*. Varian, the last page reached, threw down his faithful, blue lieutenant, stretched his arms over his head, and began to think agreeably of what he would have for luncheon. Into this placid backwater of the soul, with a resounding clap upon the door, burst little Susie, bearing a telegram that she held in her apron between two soapy fingers.

"Just come for you, sir," she announced briskly, the desire that it might prove to be something exciting visibly heaving near the surface.

Varian took it languidly, with a smile and a word of thanks for the small handmaiden, who sidled slowly out of the door only because she could think of no valid excuse for remaining.

Varian tore the filmy paper open, and felt cold up his back. It was from his mother, asking him to come down at once, as she was worried about Anie. Good heavens! what could she mean? Her letter, so full of cheerful news, had been posted late yesterday afternoon. Whatever had happened, then, was an affair of last night or early this morning. It must be Ambry again. But what could Ambry do? He would be only too glad to keep out of it. Oh, Lord! Well, it had to be faced. He'd pull her back. He'd fight for her with every drop of blood in his body. Poor, unhappy

child! Had she perhaps told his mother that she wanted him?

Varian made a dash for his hat, replenished his cigarette-case, seized some telegraph blanks that he could fill out on the train, breaking the engagements of the afternoon and night, shouting meanwhile for Susie to commandeer a taxi from Eccleston Square.

Down at Wimbledon, in the humming garden, through the cool old rooms, poor Anie wandered, the ghost of herself. Last week-end, from the moment of her talk with Varian over the Japanese prints, she had been conscious that an angry little spot in her heart had softened and almost melted away. The following day she awoke without the accustomed sensation of a stifling, black curtain drawn over all the sparkling summer-world, a curtain that she must push aside, with such leaden fingers, before she could raise herself in her big, white bed and face the morning. Now she was no longer so oppressed. She opened her eyes at the first bird notes, feeling only the normal, warm relaxation of a drowsy girl. Varian was constantly in her mind—his voice, his head as he turned to speak to her, his fine, nervous, expressive hands. To be sure, she was in his atmosphere, in the home of a mother who adored, a Peetybee who worshipped. But she welcomed the spell, holding fast to the influence of his personality, just as simply as she had held his hand that dreadful day in Gordon Square. He braced her when he was with them; his memory when he was gone. She drifted through quiet days, reading, with a faint, feebly-stirring pleasure in their robust English, in their vivid seventeenth-century thoughts, the old writers that

Gita Edmonton loved. She played at cribbage and bezique with dear Miss Peet-Byng, in the mellow perfumed evenings, sitting near the open window, full in the rose breath of the gardens, the little table between them bearing candles and cards, quaint pegs and ivory counters.

But now, in one cruel moment, she was thrown back on herself, cut and gasping, angry and outraged; the fair chapel-of-ease in which she had taken refuge was knocked about her ears; something violent in her, whose existence she had scarcely suspected, broke its leash and gnawed her; the small, feeble tendrils of reawakening joy that had sprung up under Gita's tender care, that had sucked their nourishment from Varian's presence, that had turned to him as to the sun, were plucked up ruthlessly, bleeding at their roots, and flung away. She shivered from head to foot, holding in her clammy little fingers the instrument of her torture, one of Estelle's infrequent letters, already two days old, delayed in posting, written at four o'clock in the morning after a dinner in Ambry's company at Lady Susan Cust's, and a dance passed mainly in his arms. The girl, excited, very much in love, moved out of her usual hard self-control, had dashed off this scrawl to the sister who was better than no confidant at all, their mother, unsatisfied as to Ambry's income, both present and prospective, being flintlike in her disapproval.

Anie sat in the morning-room where her letters had been brought to her. In all the quiet chambers there was to be heard nothing more stirring than a discreet footfall; garden sounds alone invaded the almost conventual stillness and tranquillity that Mrs. Edmonton

craved, and that the faithful Bee knew the secret of securing, even with a household of men and maids. Anie stared with hot, strained eyes at a little landscape hung low on the faded striped satin of the wall, just in her line of vision. It was a simple enough scene in the Jura, the merit of the sketch consisting in the subtlety with which the long ripple of the distant foot-hills approximated the dimpling indentations of a woman's shoulder. But no vibration went out from it to Anie, nothing existed for her at this moment except the brittle paper in her hand and the harsh tumult in her brain. Oh, she had been a fool to listen to Varian, to bury herself down here, to leave London without seeing Ambry again. How could she be sure that Varian had not put his own construction upon that interview of his with Ambry? The poor child, out of those hidden, muddy depths that even the most crystal-souled carry within them, drew up this cloudy sediment of suspicion to poison the wells of her faith and trust in the one person who understood her miserable plight. If she had stayed in London—ah, yes, if she had, what would she have been forced to see? Ambry, sick to death of her, bored, hard, and cruel, telling her so in as many words, turning his back on her to take up with Estelle, fascinated by her recklessness, by her beauty, by her sharp, witty, careless tongue. This is what Estelle had taken the pains to write at four o'clock in the morning. She had lost that usually high, cool head, she was deep in those dangerous waters already, deep in them up to her beautiful white shoulders—up to her very neck.

Anie moved her poor, feverish little body restlessly,

head and hands hot and trembling. She must do something; she couldn't sit here, as in a hideous vacuum, choking to death. How mad and stupid she had been to destroy all those tablets! She had no means of getting more down here. . . . Should she ask Gita to lend her the car for the afternoon, to take her up to London? She would go directly to Wilton Place, and—but here she stopped, and desperately hid her eyes.

Miss Peet-Byng found her a quarter of an hour later, when the first hysterical outburst was sobbing to its close. Greatly alarmed, the good Bee knelt and drew to her the hot, hopeless, wet little face, asking no questions, soothing the poor child with that soft, inarticulate murmur that pours the balm of human sympathy into the torn, the bleeding, the heavy-laden. Bee was distinctly frightened, and very much at sea, but she did not show it. The child had had bad news—that crumpled letter. She would have to disturb Gita, much as she hated to.

Anie volunteered no explanation. She gave her friend a small, damp kiss, and said she would go to her room. Bee saw her safely there, and then flew to Mrs. Edmonton. The short time that elapsed between Gita's appraisal that something was wrong with her young guest and the moment when she tapped gently at Anie's door, short as it was, had been long enough for the swallowing of certain innocent-looking white pellets that desperate, rummaging hands had seized as they lay winking at the bottom of the dressing-case, having in some unexplained fashion escaped the *auto-da-fé* of their comrades.

Listening, alarmed, hearing no answer to her knock,

Gita drew open the door to find the girl, extraordinarily bright-eyed, sitting on the edge of the bed; the room in disarray, the wardrobe open, the contents of the dressing-bag heaped, pell-mell, upon the floor. The letter Bee had spoken of was nowhere to be seen. A glass, half-filled with water, was on the point of dropping from Anie's limp hand. The girl, flushed but dreamy, tear-stained but composed, seemed fast locked in some unnatural reverie. She made no sign of having observed Gita's entrance. The latter sat down beside her and held her hand, feeling the pulse. She looked at the pupils of her eyes, at the glass of water, at the disordered dressing-bag with its flock of gold-stoppered bottles. Still no word or movement on Anie's part, save the dawning of a sleepy little satisfied smile on the dry lips. . . . Then Gita rang for the maid, summoned Bee, ordered strong black coffee, and between them, at the end of half an hour, they had called the unhappy child, faint, weak, and racked, back to her pain and to her responsibilities.

Her head on Gita's breast, her tears dropping on the soft laces there, she told her little story. Estelle took the stuff, too, when she was tired or fidgety. It is so frightful to lie awake hour after hour. Oh, ever so many girls did it. There were ways of getting it—she didn't know exactly how. She had helped herself out of Estelle's bottle. Still, the reason for its use to-day hung fire.

"Something upset you this morning? Won't you tell me what?" asked Gita gently. "Your happiness and Varian's mean more to me than anything else in the world. Let me help you, little Anie."

Gita let her lips rest where they fell on the loops of shining hair.

Varian's name pulled the girl up. Varian had the key. Varian knew. Would dear Gita mind if she talked to him?

Dear Gita, immensely relieved at having struck an answering spark, no matter how faint and flickering, sent off a man, hot-foot to the station, with a telegram for Cambridge Street.

Coming up the drive the first thing that caught Varian's eye was a magnificent, purple blob of colour, moving slowly, like an air-blown bubble, up and down, up and down, before the shallow, entrance steps—his mother's parasol, from under whose rosy shadow her delicate, lace-draped head turned toward him, her soft, anxious eyes meeting the leaping questions in his.

He seized her hands. "What on earth is the matter? I am frightfully anxious. She is ill? Something devilish has happened? She has had letters from London?"

"Come into my room." They crossed the wide, shaded hall—sweet, too sweet, thought Varian impatiently, because Anie was not there to smell it—with honeysuckle and roses set about on all its little stands and tables.

His mother drew him down beside her on the low sofa.

"It began with a letter, from whom I don't know. She hasn't told me. Doubtless the unhappy London affair has broken out again. Either the man is writing to her"—Varian shook his head impatiently—"or Estelle has said something to open the wounds the

poor little thing is scarred with. Bee found her almost hysterical, and got her to her room. Then she called me. Now comes the serious part, Varian." His mother looked at him fixedly. "Oh, Varian, if a child of mine should ever be so tempted!"

"Good heavens, mother," cried the boy, springing to his feet, "tell me at once what has happened. You leave me to imagine horrors. She didn't——"

"No, no. She's safe, she's safe. You are to see her at once. But—when I found her, she was sitting on the edge of the bed—her eyes, her hands, her dry lips, the whole look of her—the tumbled dressing-case, the bottles tossed about. I knew at once. She had taken some dreadful drug, and not for the first time, either."

Varian groaned. "Poor little unhappy thing!"

"Yes. I could weep when I think of Etta's abominable way of bringing up those girls. It all came out. Estelle does it, too. Oh, all of them do. If you can't sleep, if anything goes wrong, well, there's the convenient little bottle on the dressing-table—Bee and I worked over her till she came out of it, but she would not, could not, poor child, quite make up her mind to confide in me. She will talk to you, I think. You care so very much, Varian? Dear boy." Those soft hands at his neck, that cheek pressed down against his own!

"Bless you for understanding," he mumbled. "That last year at Crops began it, and now the mischief is fatally done. I got hold of her in London and pulled her back from shipwreck. Will she let me carry her in my arms a second time? They'll wait, empty, itching, all the rest of my life, if she won't. *Carita*, you're

an angel to her and to me. I'll try not to make more of a fool of myself than need be. It plays the devil with work. Fortescue will be giving me the sack one of these fine days."

"Martini β isn't coming on?"

"How can he, poor chap, with his nose so hideously out of joint? When may I see Anie? Now? Is she down? Is she in the garden?"

"No, the light hurts her eyes. She's in the Lacquer Closet; I'll take you up."

His mother left him at the door. He went in and closed it behind him. The white face, the relaxed hands, the small, helpless figure in the long, eastern chair, made it difficult for him to speak. She looked up, saw him, and attempted the ghost of a smile. He dragged forward a carved stool and sat down beside her, both of them glad of a moment or two of silence.

The light filtering through the pieces of greenish glass set in the flat window was strangely tranquillizing. Varian had always liked this little room, due to the caprice of one of Mr. Colfax's ancestors who had known the East before P. and O. days. Lacquer cabinets are in the four corners, holding the most precious of porcelains, often more than daring in subject to Western eyes, but all alike flawless in period and in colour. But the curious race of pygmy-men who crawled, fought, loved and died on the surface of the cabinets themselves had ever had a nightmarish fascination for Varian. They were an evil race, the outcroppings of some diseased, opium-haunted, half-mad, neurotic brain, but what amazing virtuosity in the crafty lines, in the massing of the tiny, antlike figures, in the vigour

of the drawing, what intense feeling for form, in action or at rest! The head must be a strong one that could live with this delirious oriental rout. Luckily, the scenes were so small that, unless you chose to make a business of it, the general effect was merely blurred, pleasing, and bizarre. But venture a little nearer, and you are lost. Take one of the tiny hunting scenes, as bold as a Delacroix, where spotted pards tear at the throats of other beasts. This mangling race of biting, bleeding animals goes on, round upon round, while the pygmy sportsmen, no less savage than their game, shoot their poisoned arrows into the scuffle. Or this arabesque, that, as a sort of *leit-motif*, winds its tortuous way among more active scenes. The design, at once simple and terrible, is worked out by means of long, sinuous lines resembling the hollow, swaying stems of water-plants. These cross and recross in large, irregular curves—such curves as might well be studied in a jungle, near a pool, but here the reeds bear strange blossoms on each snaky tip, their brown, suckerlike ends expanding into animal heads—a tiger, an elephant, a gazelle—small but perfect models that can loll in the breeze like a flower. In such a spot, where the very plants take on bestial attributes, what might not happen, you ask yourself, shaking off the confused oppression common to dreams. . . .

Anie stirred uneasily, and Varian leaned over and held her hand in a brotherly grasp. These few quiet moments face to face with her had given him an excellent control of himself. But she must be the first to speak. He would take her line.

The girl made a nervous effort to brace herself

against the sloping back of her chair. She freed her hands, pressing them down on either side of her on the yielding cane till it creaked again, lifting her slight body from the waist, dragging up her thin young legs, the slim ankles, the arched feet from which the slippers, bronze and buckled, were ever half-dropping. Now she could look him full in the face, and she did bravely enough.

"I've been wicked as well as weak, Varian," she said, her voice pitched a little higher than usual. "Gita made that plain. Her horror of—me!" She searched him with her miserable eyes. "Was it so bad of me? Am I tainted? Am I lost? What did Gita tell you?"

"Oh, you poor child, don't you think I understand? Whatever you do is, in the doing, changed for me. Can't you see that? For me, you are always the little girl at Crops, and I am here to be turned to, to be the brother you never had—if that is what you want me to be." Varian smiled an internal, rueful smile at the insipid rôle for which he had thus cast himself. He must get her confidence, in order to frighten her away from that easy, royal, drowsy, white-pellet-strewn road; on whose border her feet were even now perhaps straying—nervous, indecisive, terrified feet, digging holes in the spongy, sickly turf with an irritable toe and heel. . . . Anie, Anie, you little fool! He must drag her back to firm, fresh foothold on the hard, clean gravel of sane living, if he had to hurt her badly in the doing.

"Oh, you are good to me, but I am horrid." She would not look at him now. "I fancied I was getting stronger, more sensible. Who could help it in this

beautiful, peaceful spot with your mother? In London I was torn in pieces, and mamma hounded me so. You got me out of that. Then this letter comes——”

“What letter? From whom?” Varian’s irritation was not quite so well under control as he had imagined.

“No, no, not from him,” she hastened to reassure. “Oh, rather not. What does he care? It was from Estelle, written at four o’clock in the morning, after a dance at—no matter where, I forget. She’s mad about him, do you understand? She had been dancing with him all night. To have Estelle, who is so proud—, write such things!”

“Anie, listen to me.” Varian forced her look. “Can’t you face it? Are you so weak as all that? I don’t believe it. Didn’t I put it crudely enough in London? Whatever you felt for Ambry was no lasting sentiment. How could it be? It had no root in anything but a certain personal fascination he knows how to use when he chooses. You had your day; now it is Estelle’s turn. Am I too brutal? I maintain that you do not love—that you never have loved Ambry. What do you know about it, you poor little thing? It was only a glamour you were caught in. He manages cleverly enough. How were you, in your innocence, to realize? It was that very incomprehension of yours that bored him. You were always beating your dove’s wings toward the sky, and he knew himself to be clipped and caged, down in the mud. What happens? He throws you over in the frankest terms, and whistles for Estelle. . . . Yes, I mean to hurt you. You must whip up your pride. You must save yourself,

no matter what happens to them. Do you care to admit that you are jealous? Impossible. Nevertheless, you go to pieces, and are mad enough, culpably weak enough, to drug yourself. Oh, he has poisoned you, you're tainted with him, if you can do that!"

He watched her. Yes, he had almost succeeded. He had flicked her pride. A little flush was creeping up the white cheek. The hands were less restless. He pressed his advantage.

"I don't suppose you know for a moment to what degradation that simple pellet commits you. If you had the faintest idea—no, don't be afraid, I'm not going into horrors—you would never touch it again. It is simply damnable the way girls are brought up. Fancy your having the stuff! And the cowardice of it! In order to forget for a few hours the natural shock that letter gave you, you wantonly imperil your whole life. O Anie, for God's sake, pull up!"

He had said more than he meant to, but, as he spoke, he had seen her sitting on the edge of the bed—vague, stupefied, drowsily smiling, as his mother had described, and everything manly, clean, and sane within him had revolted. He could have shaken her, he could have sworn at her—he could have struck her—and he felt so helpless.

Going over to the window he set it wide open, and stood looking out, seeing absolutely nothing. But his ear strained for the least sound. It came—the creaking of the bamboo, the click of heels on the polished floor. Then the sense of touch vibrated, sending a thousand prickling messages up his arm to his brain, for Anie had put her hand in his, holding it firmly,

pressing her other on his shoulder, keeping him turned to the window.

"Don't look at me. I am too hideous. Never, never, never, so long as we both live, will I touch one of those abominable things again. I'll burn inside and out first. I am low. I am jealous. But you have shown me how to fight. Gita showed me this morning. She could not conceal her horror of me. To her I was unclean."

Varian turned to protest, to take her in his arms, losing his head under the direct, close pressure of those small hot hands.

"No, no, don't move—not just yet. I must tell you something else. From this moment I will try never to think of Ambry again, intimately, as someone who has—(he knew she gulped over it) who has kissed me, as someone whom I thought I loved. You have shown me my stupid folly, but why didn't he leave me alone? I bored him from the very beginning. We never thought the same thoughts. He never knew me. Varian, that's all over now—dead, dead, dead. I am going to show you and Gita that I am not such a miserable little fool as you imagine. I have some soldier-blood in me as well as you. Will Gita keep me on a little longer, do you think? Will she want me with her now?" Such an anxious, flushed face barely laid against his arm, as she moved around to look up at him! Varian mastered a weakness that made him want to sit down.

"Anie, you amazing little humbug! Don't you know she loves you!"

He felt that they had both had enough. He must get her down gently from the heroic pitch. He did not

fear a reaction, however. He knew the voice of an awakened will, however girlish, however feminine, when he heard it. But her nerves would presently set her humming if he didn't change the note.

"The day is divine. Come into the garden. We'll pick up Gita and Bee and have a *conversazione* in the Bois. I have a premonition that I shall devour a tremendous luncheon. Then this afternoon *you* shall read to *me*. Come!"

"My face is so hot. Let me run and put some powder on my nose. Will you tell Gita I am coming down? Will you give her my love, too, Varian?"

She stood with her hand on the low door leading into her bedroom. Varian had opened the other one that communicated with a private corridor.

"Varian——"

He went over to her.

"If you mind my hanging on you, you must say so now. For I do hang, body and soul, you poor boy!" Eyes and lips smiled at him as she vanished. He did not care to analyze just then the impression her words gave him. He had a shrewd notion that they would be all he would have to feed on for some time to come. So he went down to reassure a troubled Gita, wandering restlessly about the hall, pinching unhappy rosebuds not used to such treatment. She went forward to meet him.

"Well?"

"More than well," he answered. "I've frightened her out of her wits. She'll never touch one of those beastly things again. She'll fight. She has it in her. It seems the same chap is now hanging around Estelle,

who doesn't know of his affair with Anie—not that it would greatly disturb that young lady if she did. Oh, it's a miserable business all around. The worst of it is that Ambry and I have always been friends, but he should have kept his claws off a young thing like Anie. Estelle can jolly well look out for herself, but poor Anie dropped like a shot. It naturally makes me boil. He has acted like an ineffable cad, and I had to tell him so; but, will you believe it? he considers that we are still friends, and, when I come to think of it, I don't know that he's far wrong. When you are with him—there is something. It lies deeper than his extraordinary good looks.”

“Who is this wonderful youth?” asked his mother.
“Ambry—not Sir Ambry Nunholme?”

“Yes. Do you remember him? You never saw him, did you? Do you know his mother?”

“Oh, slightly, years ago. Your letters from Oxford used to be full of the boy.”

“Everyone spoils him. He's that type. I almost think Estelle may land him. She's that type, too. The whole affair makes me rather sick. Why aren't there more sweet women in the world like you, mother?”

“Is she coming down, dear? What am I to say?”

“Nothing. Leave it to her. She sent her love to you, and hopes you'll ‘keep her on’!”

“Poor child!”

Anie had bathed her face, powdered her nose, and slipped on a batiste frock with a high, babyish belt. She joined them, not more shyly than might have been expected. Gita kissed her, as if she saw her for the

first time that morning. This put them all at their ease.

"We must make the most of our young man," Gita was saying, her arm in Anie's, gently drawing her toward the terrace. "He tells me he must go back to London and his writing-table after dinner. Varian, bring the parasols, will you? They are in the corner by the clock. What a heavenly day it is! We must not pass more of it indoors than we can help. Are you sure you don't want to run up to town, Anie? You know you can have the car and Bee whenever you wish."

"Oh, no, no," cried the girl rather piteously, as if shrinking from something that hurt her. Varian couldn't keep his eyes off her. Of this she was no doubt conscious, but she wouldn't look at him.

"Well," went on Gita easily, bent upon making conversation, as she could get no aid from the meditative, youthful pair who dutifully accompanied her, one on either side, holding green and violet sunshades, "Well, what of that little expedition of yours to Countess Street to the *Boutique des Miracles*, that you wrote me about the other day, where the pretty young woman, the athletic young man, and the aged father whom you did not see—a complete bill of the play—are even now engaged in collaborating with us and our milk cans? Anie and I are thirsting for more details. I believe they must all be long-lost heirs to some cloudy marquise, or to a barony, at the least. Nothing more unlike shopkeepers could well be imagined. Varian, if Anie and I come up some afternoon next week, or the week after, will you take us there? Why not have

them down here afterwards, just ourselves, you know, for tea in the garden before the roses are gone? People like that, with energy and ideas, are the only ones who ever repay the tiresome effort we make to know them. How does that strike you?" giving her dreaming son's arm a pinch.

"Jolly!" he replies, with the exaggerated conviction of one who wishes to prove to you that he has been following your conversation with an attention so intense as to be almost fatiguing. This, of course, never takes anyone in, neither did it in this instance seduce so naturally credulous a person as a mother.

"We must talk it over when you come down on Saturday," went on the indefatigable Gita, not having rambled along with so little encouragement for years. "Bring with you what you have done on Martini β . I want to see it."

Still that dreaming silence, the young feet carefully keeping pace with hers, the hands busy manipulating sunshades, so that they should not catch in one's laces or one's hair, the eyes busy with the Lord knows what, over one's head, plunged into the shadowless turquoise blue of the summer sky. . . .

The faithful Bee came to the rescue, mounting the terrace steps laboriously, her basket overflowing with the coquettish, flaunting little faces of the sweet peas, dyed every delicious tone of salmon, of shell pink, of lemon, of cream, of citron, of orange. Just to enumerate them, just to look at them, made you thirsty for some cool drink in tall, thin, frosty glasses.

"Oh, I say, Peetybee, dear, you look most awfully hot," exclaimed Varian, giving his mother her purple

parasol in order to relieve Bee of basket and gardening scissors. "Come down to the Bois with us and I'll fan you with a cabbage leaf if there's one about."

Bee's warm face beamed on her boy, her disregarded spectacles zigzagging rakishly across her narrow forehead, her faded blue eyes filled with the light she could always summon up for him.

"My dear Varian, let me go. I must arrange these for the luncheon-table," stretching out tentative fingers after her ravished basket.

"Arrange? Nonsense!" her boy carried it off with a high hand. "Mother, did you ever hear of anything so absurd? We'll stuff them into their little pots and jars in two minutes, and whisk them on the table before Jackson has had time to think of handing the fish, or whatever else we begin with. See if we don't!"

Gita laughed. "Humour him, my dear Bee. He has had a touch of the sun, I think. Give me your arm. Let Anie and Varian go ahead to pull out our chairs for us."

So the batiste gown and the green parasol vanished behind the laurels beside an impetuous Varian, who, giving rein to his spirits after the cold douche of the morning, played them out gayly. Watching for a smile on those lips to which the deep red was slowly ebbing back. . . .

"What a morning you have had, dear Gita," Bee gently fussed. "You must let me tuck you up directly after luncheon. Is Varian staying on?"

"He will dine with us. He tells me he must go back to-night. You see he has pulled her up. I took him into the Lacquer Closet where she was lying down,

limp as a rag. He was with her for more than an hour. He finally appeared, all the strain gone, with the good news that he had frightened her out of her senses, and that she had solemnly promised never to touch the dreadful thing again. There has been an unfortunate singeing of inexperienced wings in London, you understand, Bee, and one of her letters made too close a reference to it. It hurt, of course, and behold, she rushes to her tablets. Oh, these modern girls and modern mothers! Etta is worse than I thought her. If we can keep Anie with us for a month or so—she begs to stay—we shall have her little heart and mind and soul washed clean and sweet. She will be empty, unmarked, quite virginal, *tabula rasa*, as is fitting. Then will come our boy's opportunity."

Bee opened wide her eyes of amazement. Gita gave her a little shake.

"Look, my dear, what more do you want?"

They raked the green entrance to the Bois. The chairs having been duly placed, Varian had thrown himself down near the one containing the small batiste figure, the dark, little bare head. His attitude, his gaze, his stillness said nothing yet betrayed everything.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AMBRY on the day of Lady Susan's dinner, feeling rather let-down, was smoking a tasteless cigarette after breakfast, stretched full-length on the lounge under the window, flicking from time to time tiny cones of grey ash over the ruddy heads of the geraniums in the green box below the striped awning.

Lord! what a bore it was becoming to pick up the day when you hadn't gone to bed till five o'clock of that same morning. He must get away for longer than a week-end. Estelle was growing a little bit too much for him. They were beginning to be invited a little too uniformly together. She was capable of managing that, confound her. He was sure Lady Cassock knew nothing about it. She showed her vexation too plainly. He had never felt so hunted in his life. By Jove, he'd clear out. But, as he mentally said it, he knew he should never do it. He hated exertion and planning and getting the money together. He wrinkled his brows. Look at the bills on the table now. Great heavens! Estelle ought to know he couldn't marry. What was she after? Why didn't her mother look out for her a bit? It wasn't his place. He took what he could get. What eyes she had when she threw her head back against your shoulder! He could feel her elastic figure under his hand now. She had given him practically every dance last night, sitting out with the other fellows when she had to, just to appease her

mother. They had rather cooked their goose, he was afraid.

This London life was all very well, but women and girls got hold of you so. You had nothing to do except the things they did, and consequently they had you. No matter how early you rode, some confounded habit was there before you. They swarmed at polo, they haunted the river, you fell over them in Bond Street, they grabbed you for tea, hounded you, one on either side at dinner, captured you for every dance, or your hostess did it for them. You ran down somewhere—anywhere—the most unlikely of places for the weekend, and one was sure to pop up under your nose on the very station.

He simply couldn't let this Estelle business go on. She had evidently lost her head—he had, too, for a wild moment, but he'd found it again—and he would have to pay the piper. O Lord, what a grind it was! He supposed it was different with a girl in your own set. With the other kind you could put it rather plainly. Also, as he could not afford to forget, Estelle was no Anie. He was glad, in a way, because they met more on a level. With the other little one, always in the clouds, pleading, plaintive, helpless, so foolishly small and thin, reedy like an undeveloped child, devouring you with her eyes, you were continually at a disadvantage, trying to play up, and hating it—bored when she gazed at you, savage when she touched you, desperately determined to shake her off, cost what it might. She had made him feel like a cad, which is never pleasant to your Ambrys, a certain fastidiousness in their simple egotism demanding that nothing shall

shake their inner faith in themselves—the most intense thing about them.

Anie's sweetness, her innocent showing of her little moved heart, had come as near as anything in his experience to touching to life Ambry's better qualities, the manly, decent, wholesome ones that had had a kind of forced spring at Oxford, but that the London air had nipped and shrivelled. For a moment, under Anie's fingers, in the first flush of their meeting down there in the old country house, these tender shoots had very visibly stirred and trembled. But it couldn't last, the renaissance was not yet. He had never mentioned her to Estelle; he didn't even know if she knew he knew her. Estelle was busy with her own affairs, and with his, evidently. He thought with vexation of the telegram at this moment in his pocket, commanding him, with all the curtness of their code, to meet her at eleven in front of Harrod's. What extraordinary places she chose! He hoped she'd have the sense to be there on time. He didn't see himself patrolling, if she weren't there. Half a hundred people they knew might run over them. Well, it was on her own head. She wouldn't listen to reason. To be sure, she had a way of galvanizing you, when you were with her, so that you went farther than you ever meant to. She was so vivid, so high-blooded, as free and strong as a young colt. If she ever were to feel the bit some day, he had a disgusted suspicion that his hand would not be the one to press it home between those full red lips. She would be the one to run him. Well, then, he must escape. He'd tell her so this very day, when he had got her away from Harrod's into the backwater of some half-slummy street. How he hated

them! You fell over children and cats. It was hot, noisy, deadly. He believed women liked such things. It was "shady," it was adventurous. It was all that, but it was damned unpleasant, too. They ought to have enough sense to realize that a chap can't stand much of that sort of thing. At least, let the suggestion for such clandestine snatches come from him. But, oh no, the modern girl takes one bite at you, and holds on. You are the prey, not she, as in those dim Victorian days. The Ambrys of the time, these fine flowers of our latest civilization, thus show the weaknesses of over-cultivation. Their women are no longer the innocent victims of native brawn or the well-seasoned club. Far from it; the ladies scan your points with an appraising eye, mark you down for their own, asking no assistance from mamma, and get you, too, by Jove!

Estelle had practically kidnapped Ambry, but he still had some fight left in him. Aid and comfort, however, from an unexpected quarter were already on the way. Had he glanced out, with those fine, lazy, half-sulky eyes of his, under the striped awning, over the ash-dotted red geraniums, into the sunny morning street, he would have seen a solitary Grouchy, marshalling airy legions to his very doorstep, numerous enough to turn the scale of his imminent Waterloo.

As he pulled himself up to reach a long arm for a cigarette, Dodgson knocked and presented a card.

"Not a confounded bill in person, eh?" demanded Ambry, his eyes on the man, his fingers fumbling vaguely over the salver.

“Oh, no, Sir Ambry,” responded the dutiful one. “A gentleman.”

“Bills often look like that, nowadays.”

He held the card under his nose. “Good Lord! what can he want?” he murmured. “Show him up, will you? And I’m not home to anyone else.”

He got to his feet, touched his collar and tie, saw to his handkerchief, slipped his cigarette-case into its accustomed pocket, looked at his watch, tweaked the travelling-clock into position so that its face shone roundly at you across the room—he must leave himself ten minutes to get to Harrod’s, even if he had to put his guest out by the shoulders.

Another instant and he had walked across the room to meet his friend, greeting him warmly, almost shyly, if we can, without too much difficulty, associate such a manner with what we know of our young man, who was really of rather simple a mechanism for all his gorgeous exterior.

“It’s most awfully good of you to look me up,” he began. “Do sit down, here by the window—it’s rather hot, isn’t it?—and have a cigarette.”

“Thanks. It’s good to get out of the glare of the streets. You are wise to hang an awning. You seem most comfortable here—very good rooms—nice street, fairly quiet for London. How are you? You haven’t put on an inch since Oxford days. Do you train? Polo, eh?”

The visitor leaned back in the leather chair, crossed a pair of thin legs, showing a generous length of violet stocking, held his finger-tips together in the way that has been said to hall-mark your curate, and bent a

keenly interested, reflective gaze upon his young friend, from behind the heavy, distorting lenses of his spectacles. The thin, ungainly figure, the bent shoulders, the meagre neck seemed at pains to rear upright the massive weight of that fine head, with its closely-set ears, its beaked nose, its extensive brow intensified by the retreat of the fast-thinning hair, with its thousand and one pleasant little subtleties of modelling due to the restless, unceasing reaction of the mind upon its encasing flesh.

After Ambry had gone down, Johnstone-Ford had heard from him in some half-dozen enthusiastic letters scattered through his first year of London life, as his set leads it. Then the inevitable slump had followed. No one reads in London, Ambry discovered, and serious talk is always boring. He fell out of touch with his old tutor; certain secret bookish inclinations died a natural death. He could think of nothing appropriate to say, so he wrote no more. Twice only had he seen Ford, since leaving Oxford, once for a few moments in London after an international scientific congress; once in Baden-Baden whither Ford had drifted one afternoon from some obscure, cheap cure he was making in the vicinity.

Now he sat here, in Ambry's rooms, in his leather chair, and looked at him in the same old, kindly, owlsh way. The boy's heart met him, his mind grew alert, he was glad Ford had come. But where had he dropped from, and why?

"You are surprised to see me, no doubt," remarked Ford. "You do not get our little Oxford news. I am off for a year"—Ambry made a movement of astonish-

ment—"Yes, that is the usual gesture, but one does not choose oftentimes to take the whole world into one's confidence. To you, my dear boy, I can easily say that it is by the doctor's orders, but this need not go any further. Young Talbot has stepped into my shoes and I am on leave, here in London, free to carry out certain small experiments that have been germinating in my mind for some years. My book is shelved; there is to be no work of that kind. Again you perceive the harsh professional note of the medical schools. So I am experimenting with life, externally, empirically, as it were. I confess there is a stimulus in it, but you must let yourself go. I am just beginning to learn how to do so. I had no idea I had been growing so stiff, mentally and physically. Well! Now to my point. I am the Secretary and General Manager of a Neighbourhood Guild, a sort of shelter for men and boys, non-sectarian, and sufficiently flavoured with socialistic notions to meet the taste of the day. You must understand that all that part of it is quite indifferent to me. The founder, a wealthy manufacturer who keeps us going financially, oh, liberally, you know, also supplies the shoddy propaganda to catch the ear of the homeless multitude——"

"But what are you doing in that *galère*, in heaven's name?" burst out Ambry.

Johnstone-Ford fixed him with a gaze rather humourously magnified by his glasses into a good-natured glare.

"I do not find that so easy to explain. For some years I have been conscious of a desire to try my skill upon the virgin material a slum provides in such un-

grudging abundance. The crude, the dumb, the inarticulate, the raw product of the poor, the waifs with no background—upon such as these I have felt a veritable itch to experiment. The charms of birth, of breeding, of sophistication, the queer little mental deposits due to centuries of inbreeding—of all this I have had enough and to spare with you and your likes at Oxford. We swim along together with the current as it ever sets, *là-bas*, but——” Ford recrossed the left leg over the right and mused upon the exchange.

“But what?” Ambry felt he must get him on.

“The pace was stultifying. I was turning to mummy,” Ford tapped his chest with one long finger. “I had nourished for some time, as I have just told you, the wish to inoculate the perfectly undeveloped, the potentially worthless offspring of the very poor with—well, with what do you suppose?—Greek!” He brought it out with such whimsical defiance that Ambry shouted.

“Homeric laughter is good for the soul. Laugh on, my boy, but come down and see me with one of my evening classes. You will change your note. You will perceive that if you awaken the intelligence with a shock, if you hold its nose under water—even of the Pierian Spring—till your young victim has become purple, he will, when released, suck of that gladly which before had been his bane. But enough of cloudy theory.”

Johnstone-Ford sat up straight and drew a watch from his pocket. So he, too, had an appointment. Ambry breathed again.

“How you ever make your young ruffians swallow

it at all is a tribute to your character. Why you don't find yourself with a small-sized riot on your hands and a wrecked Neighbourhood House is a mystery to me. Also, the whole affair is dead against the founder's intentions, isn't it? Socialism and the Classics—the lion and the lamb! How have you managed it?"

"Oh, very easily. Our worthy manufacturer has a healthy contempt for the literate. He knows that I and my Greek are equally doomed to a just extinction in no long time; but, being broad-minded and humane, he suffers me, I will not say gladly. Recently, he has whistled a different tune. You see the boys come, the men, too—well, I keep them quiet for an hour, perhaps longer. Of my methods he is uniformly scornful. If I chose to throw shadow-pictures on a sheet, it would be all the same to him. In fact, he would probably regard our chalk characters on the blackboard, when we are in the midst of our business, as a fair equivalent for the trail of hopping rabbits on a magic-lantern slide. But progress is to be seen—slight, irregular, perhaps, but real. I cannot be deceived in that."

"But tell me," urged Ambry, interested in spite of himself, "what is it leading to? Is it anything more than an experiment to prove that the most unlikely material, no matter how degenerate, will vibrate to your master hand?—oh, you must know you have that! Or is there something else behind it? What do the poor devils themselves get out of it?"

"A drug, Nunholme, a drug—something to take the place of food and drink and heat and life." Johnstone-Ford spoke warmly, rapidly, quite unlike his usual manner.

Ambry was struck unpleasantly. Poor old chap, that was probably what the doctor meant. He was getting a bit queer, and they had shut down on work. But here he was, hard on this eccentric trail, his *idée fixe*, teaching Greek to the slums. O Lord!

Ford rose to his feet. "My dear Nunholme, I have an appointment at eleven, and I dare say you have also. Give me five minutes more. You naturally wonder why I have dropped in on you to-day, out of the clouds. I saw in the papers that Mr. Poynter had gone abroad to rest. I have followed you sufficiently to know that you are his secretary. I thought it more than possible that you would be in London, free from your duties for the time being. It may seem extraordinary to you that I should associate you in my thoughts with my present work, yet such is the case. Now that my Greek classes are taking so well, my secretarial duties suffer. Do you catch my drift? Will you come over and help us? Will you disappear for a few weeks into a new world? Will you come out of the darkness of Society, as it is understood in Wilton Place, to emerge into the light as it is made manifest in Ridges Street, by the curious reversed process of plunging?"

As he spoke, Ambry's mind went racing. How was it that Ford had seemed to divine that he would like nothing better, at this harassed moment, than to submerge himself and his identity, that personality so strongly coveted by Estelle, in some far haunt, lost alike to fair, impassioned friends and to indiscreet, dunning foes? By Jove! it was worth trying. He could light out, leaving word with Dodgson that he had quitted London for a fortnight. Much could happen

in that time. Things would have a chance to cool. Privately, he would instruct Dodgson that letters left were to be forwarded to——A. Holmes, so-and-so, Ridges Street. He saw it all work out beautifully before his inner eye. Then he brought his gaze back to Johnstone-Ford who was awaiting his answer.

“By what amazing chance,” asked he, “did you know that I would snap at just such an offer as you make me?”

“You will snap, then?” cried Ford. “You will come?”

“Like a shot. They hound me, they hunt me—bills and—other things. My mother hasn’t recovered from the last cheque she wrote me, and although my step-father has acted like a trump, you can’t bleed him too often, you know. To disappear blamelessly for a couple of weeks would be my salvation. I’ll come to-morrow, or my courage may ooze out. Where is Ridges Street?”

“In the neighbourhood of Pimlico. My sister keeps a tiny flat for me. You will be our guest. My dear boy, it is too late for another word.” Here Ford looked about nervously for his hat. “Expect a letter from me to-morrow morning with directions and explanations. The life will seem very odd to you at first—old clothes, you know, no servant, and no title.”

“Of course,” said Ambry. “I shall be A. Holmes. I’ve thought it all out.”

“O youth! You ride ever on the wine-dark wave. To-morrow, then. Await my letter by the first post.”

In high good humour, Johnstone-Ford shook his

young recruit's hand, and was piloted into a taxi by the ever-ready, whistle-bearing Dodgson.

Left to himself, Ambry envisaged the situation with a kindling eye. There, on the horizon brink, were the tall, waving tops of the palms; under their enticing shade gurgled a cool trickle of clear water; the caravans were coming in with the evening—no mirage, this—safety and seclusion beckoned to him in this beast-haunted London desert, from the green oasis of Ridges Street. Oh, it would be rum. He'd drop out; he'd pass; he'd lie close, just around the corner, and be safer than if he went to India. He must send a line to his mother, telling her that he had suddenly joined his old tutor for a—walking-tour; yes, that would do, and he would see her again in a few weeks. He would keep Dodgson posted as to where a telegram could reach him; but she was not to write, not to worry, and he had enough money. That would touch her. Now he must fly to his purgatory in front of Harrod's. What was he doing to-night? He swept over a heap of cards. Dinner at Lady Susan's; must pick up Lady Cassock and Estelle, and go on with them; then they would drag him to some dance or other, he supposed. They had him; he couldn't escape—yet. He'd take all he could get to-night; come home, write his letters, pitch together his oldest togs, and, with the morning breeze, hoist sail for Ridges Street. It had an engaging sound.

He left the taxi at the corner below Harrod's in order to escape the attentions of the uniformed door-opener in front of the shop, and found himself, to his extreme annoyance, caught in a feminine flood that

surged, and swept, and gurgled into the full tide of a summer sale. What a cursed place to ask anyone to meet you! He ground his teeth. How the devil could Estelle expect him to find her in this unseemly rout? In reality, he was too jostled and vexed to care whether he saw the young lady or not. He'd give her five more minutes. As a matter of fact, she had him in her eye before the elapse of two of them. He had forgotten that at this particular hour and spot he would be a much more noticeable object than any girl, however striking. Estelle came up and touched his arm with the crook of her tall-handled parasol.

"Shall we get out of this?" she asked coolly.

"Rather," he answered, barely looking at her.

She steered him skilfully through the mob of her sister-souls, actually pausing for a moment to ask him if some damnable turban wasn't a duck of a hat—the *aplomb* of the girl!—till they found themselves around a corner, out of the swarm, committed to a long, unlovely thoroughfare, whose principal commerce seemed to centre in bicycle repair-shops, in petrol and tyre vendors.

"I'm most awfully sorry I asked you to meet me there," began Estelle, as she saw that he had no intention of looking at her, "but I was at my wits' end, mother was fussing, and I quite forgot about those beastly sales. Sorry, Ambry."

She really was fascinating, incredibly so, when she chose to soften a bit and smooth a fellow down. She had on a ripping gown, white and blue, all stuck over with little glass buttons, and the big hat with wheat absurdly standing up in it. Oh, well——

"I don't mind much, now," he admitted graciously. "You look awfully well this morning. How on earth do you do it? You couldn't have had five hours' sleep."

"Never mind that. I'm used to it. Let us talk," but she seemed to experience a slight difficulty in beginning, and he made no attempt to help her. They moved on slowly. A most noticeable, but not an harmonious pair—he, busy with his plans for escape, she, weaving strands to bind him.

"Do you realize that you are as dumb as a fish sometimes?" She plunged headlong. "What are you going to do from the end of the month? Mother says we must stay in town till the 28th. If you showed a spark of interest, we might arrange to see something of each other. Mother hasn't taken a place this year, because she says we are rather hard up—that I cost too much. That is simply to grumble, because I don't begin to cost as much as she does. So I suppose that means we'll bob around from one visit to another. You see, something could be managed in that way. Do you know, sometimes I think you don't care, Ambry, and then, as you did last night, you make it all come real again." For Estelle to admit as much as this was rather staggering. Ambry had the grace to feel ashamed. He played for time.

"It's a hideous bore, you know, but my affairs are horribly mixed up. I simply can't look ahead a week. Mother and Goodrich-Dow have taken a shooting, so I suppose I'll put in some of the time with them. I don't know. I may stay on in town, getting in a bit of work. I've let everything slide frightfully. You've knocked me in the head, so that half the time I don't

know what I'm about. You are becoming rather too much for me, you know, Estelle. You are too expensive a luxury for a poor devil like me. How can I live up to you?"

"You've never cared to try, Ambry," she replied quietly. He felt cold; she was gaining on him and he knew it. Oh, he was ripe for Ridges Street!

"I don't quite know what you mean," he remarked, thinking that subterfuge safe. "Even if I am mad about you, there's nothing to be gained by losing our heads. Your mother is rather ferocious, as it is. She was barely civil to me last night—said I made you conspicuous. Suppose I did? If you go to a ball you must dance with someone, mustn't you? Let us lie low for a bit. Nothing can come of rushing things. When a fellow hasn't any money, he's most awfully tied by the leg. You can see that, can't you, Estelle?"

He felt like a worm, as he let her have it, but you had to do something to keep your head and hers above water, if she were too far gone to help herself.

They had moved out of the bicycle zone and were now breathing the more rarefied air of the dealers in antiquities whose windows, multifariously stuffed, winked at you with the twinkle of their glass and their brasses, with the polish of their mahogany, with the shining of a hundred porcelain trifles. The morning sun lay in white patches on the awnings that kept the pavement cool and shaded before their inviting doors. Ambry's wandering eye was caught by an airy little dancing figure in *biscuit de Sèvres*, some eighteenth-century variation of Columbine, poised on infinitesimal toes, when Estelle's voice reawakened him to the con-

sciousness of the hot, noisy, boring walk they were having, arousing once more his uneasy distaste for the rôle she was forcing him to play. So he put it to himself.

"You needn't rub it in, you know," she was remarking. "I'm not going to run off with you to the first Registry Office. Be a little decent, can't you, Ambry? You know things like that—hurt." She put up her parasol suddenly, and he had a suspicion that tears might not be far from those brilliant eyes. What a dangling fool he had been to get into this mess! What in heaven's name did she expect him to do? When he tried to be sensible, he only made matters worse, apparently. Well, then, he'd make her as conspicuous as need be, if that was what she wanted. There'd be only one day more of it, at all events.

"Darling, put down that confounded thing, I can't see you. Estelle, what are we walking in this filthy street for? Come in a taxi and be comfortable."

He signalled an empty one and they got in.

"I ought not to do this, I suppose," she said, as he gave the vague direction, "Oh, anywhere in Bayswater."

"Oh, what's the odds?" he answered. "When I try to be prudent, you think I don't care, so let us be rash."

"So that is how you feel, is it?" she demanded. No hint of tears now in the dark, angry eyes bent upon him, the flush of her disappointment creeping up the smooth cheek. "Whatever you do and say is calculated, weighed, and pondered. When *you* commence to talk of prudence! Oh, you make me actually sick.

Because I've been frank enough to show you that you mean something to me, you begin to be frightened. One isn't prudent when one really cares. A month ago you pitched yourself at me headlong. You weren't very circumspect then, nor did you exercise yourself unduly that I should be. Oh, rather not!"

To her own ear, her voice was on the verge of trembling. She waited a moment. Ambry, a little pale, was looking at his hands crossed on the top of his stick. The taxi, a poor old thing, jolted and richoted upon its uncertain course out Bayswater way. When she was sure of herself, Estelle requested that they stop. This was done to Ambry's secret relief.

"Get out, please," said the girl, "and tell him to take me home."

"I'm most awfully sorry, dear—" began a rather conscience-stricken youth—you never knew what a girl was going to do next.

"Oh, don't mind me," retorted Estelle. "I dare say I'll be fool enough to telephone you this afternoon. Our talk this morning has been so pleasant I shall be longing for more." She leaned forward in the cab and looked at him squarely. What did she expect? Something she evidently did not find.

"Lady Susan's to-night," he said, with a weak attempt at propitiation now that he was rid of her for the moment. "You remember that I am to pick up you and your mother?"

"Did you suppose that I had forgotten?" she asked with simple scorn, rapping on the glass with her parasol as a signal for the man to go on.

The deserted Ambry, upon whom no further glance was bestowed, regarded for as long as it was visible the upstanding wheat that garnished Estelle's hat, bobbing, not ungracefully, over the lowered hood of the cab.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AS our young man walked slowly back to Wilton Place his thoughts were busy with the morrow. Lord, what a relief it would be to shelve all these interminable, half-acid, half-tearful discussions that could lead nowhere! He was immensely fond of Estelle. If he could afford it, he almost thought he would like to marry her. She had plenty of spirit and would keep a fellow going. She was handsome, too, the type that wouldn't go off in a few years. She was a thorough sport, if she would only keep her head. He supposed it was flattering, but it was a confounded bore at the same time for a girl not to be willing to play the game. Her mother knew quite well, and made it deuced plain, that he was not a marriageable quantity. He had the title, such as it was, and Appleton, but no money to keep it up. His mother gave him what she considered, poor innocent woman, a very generous allowance, but if he couldn't scrape along on it, even helped out of tight corners by his step-father's occasional cheques, how could he be conceived as the possible husband of an exceedingly expensive Estelle? Did every girl he looked at think he wanted to marry her? he asked himself viciously, being very well aware, nevertheless, that he had done much more than merely look at Estelle. Oh, he didn't flatter himself she wouldn't get over it. When he crawled out of Ridges Street at the end of the summer, she would probably

have difficulty in bringing him to mind. He said to himself that he hoped so, not meaning it, of course, and then, with a mental shake, let the whole affair glide blissfully into his subconscious depths, without so much as a splash.

His solitary ramble was beginning to amuse him. The streets were taking on their proper aspect near the park. If they were crowded, it was with his own kind—a nod here, a smile there, to some particular crony. To finish squeezing down the lid on the morning's ruffling episode, to end it with a proper twirl, he dropped into his own particular flower-shop to send a little woven basket of orange roses to Belgrave Square. He had forgotten what she had told him she was going to wear to-night, but, at least, the action would show that he bore no malice. "*He* to bear malice—!" the angry girl might justly exclaim, but of course he never gave her the chance.

He was late dressing for dinner because he had spent so much time over his letter to his mother, endeavoring to give a plausible ring to what he tardily perceived would seem uncommonly odd, *i.e.*, his departure on an innocent walking-tour before the end of the season, he, of all people, who most detested the simple life, with a knapsack, the rather sickly raptures of the scholar-gypsy. Well, she'd have to swallow it. He could think of nothing better on the spur of the moment. Dodgson had packed a shooting-kit with some flannels and odds and ends, a melancholy feeling invading his professional impassivity at the thought of the physical discomforts his young gentleman would lay himself open to, away from his capable hands. They called such

flittings "larks," but Dodgson knew that he would never had regarded them in that light had fate made *him* a young gentleman.

Ambry, in the final throes of his apparelling, rang the bell furiously, conjuring Dodgson to whistle up a taxi, a hansom, anything on wheels. He was vilely late, and Lady Cassock became a good imitation of an uncaged lioness if anyone dared to keep her waiting. Racing downstairs, pulling open the door to let out a gush of artificial light from the hall into the pure, purple twilight of the summer evening, Ambry found a discomfited and nervous Dodgson, in response to whose piercingly persuasive pipings no London gondola deigned to swim over the asphalt waves.

"Never mind; I'll pick one up," cried Ambry, brushing past him, his floating, winglike cape hanging from his famous shoulders. Hurried as he was, he instinctively slackened his pace as one of the prettiest women he had ever seen drew near, under the gas-lamp, coming from the opposite direction. She was so fresh, so quaint, in a rather odd style of dress, with a transparent little black blur of a hat on her wonderful curls, her slim arms in soft yellow gloves, her big bright eyes. In an instant he received an unusual impression of suppleness, of grace, of activity. How well she placed her little feet! She must be a foreigner—a Russian, perhaps. He supposed he'd been staring rather hard, for she shrank the least bit in the world, and then he saw that she was not alone. Beside her was a tall, thin, equally foreign-looking chap with a corkingly good figure.

At this moment a taxi spun into view around the

corner. Ambry threw himself into it, the name "Belgrave Square" on his lips effectually banishing the little pretty woman from his mind to admit the persuasive image of Estelle, dark, warm, glowing, as he knew she would be, waiting for him.

Estelle met him in the drawing-room alone, her mother being delayed by the intricacies of a new gown that hooked up in a simply impossible way, and by the clumsy fingers of a scratch maid, picked up, heaven knows where, to replace the tiresome but invaluable Marcelle, flat on her foolish French back with a *migraine*.

"Thank the Lord!" breathed Ambry devoutly. "I was preparing to be torn limb from limb by your enraged parent for daring to keep her waiting two minutes. I had to rush like the devil. That's a stunning frock you have on, my child," critically examining the skimpy apricot satin affair, daringly twisted and looped around the girl's tall young shape. She pointed a slim white finger, without saying a word, where one of the copper-coloured roses lay caught in her breast. *She* bore no malice evidently. So he was forgiven, and their night, his last one, was all before them.

Lady Cassock's penetrating soprano, sending a shower of vague directions in advance of her down the staircase, caused them to flock dutifully into the hall.

"You here, Sir Ambry," she remarked, with the acid insouciance that always put his back up—as if she hadn't known it all along!

He muttered something non-committal, as he helped them into the taxi. Lady Cassock had disposed of her motor at the beginning of the season, just when she

needed it most, for obscure reasons best known to herself. Doubtless Anie and Estelle's horses, half the time eating their heads off, had something to do with it. Her expenses were frightful, but the girls must show decently in the Row.

Much harassed, the good lady, breathing so noticeably that it was quite unbecoming—that insufferable fool of a girl must have jerked her in tighter than was absolutely necessary to make her bodice meet—busied herself, in the half-light, with an absurd little morocco notebook, not taking the time to put on her long, dangling gloves.

No one said anything. Estelle in her corner kept her eyes, slightly beringed and tired, fixed idly, unseeing, upon the golden twilight streets. Ambry, seated opposite the two women, felt suddenly invaded by a kind of *gêne*. His flicker of interest, aroused by the sight of Estelle's evening beauty, was dying out. He would have liked to pull open the door and vanish silently—dinnerless, danceless—into the easy hospitality of less gilded quarters of the town.

Looking up from her confounded little book, Lady Cassock said, apparently to the world at large, certainly not to either of her companions:

“The woman must be quite mad to fancy she can invite me to meet such a rabble, even for a week-end—with a girl on my hands, too.” The rigid hair of her elaborate coiffure appeared to rear tingling little electric heads like a Medusa's.

They were nearing their destination, indicated by red carpets and footmen. In fact, they were caught in a mass of petrol-breathing, shining-eyed monsters,

several yards from their hostess' door. Lady Cassock's singularly scanty supply of patience ran suddenly dry.

"Tell him to stop here," she commanded Ambry. "We can save time by walking a few steps. I absolutely must have two words with Lady Susan before we are sent in." The taxi stopped with a jerk. Lady Cassock hurried across the pavement, huddling her cloak, all violet and silver, across her shoulders. Ambry sulkily followed. Really that woman permitted herself to be an uncommonly uncomfortable companion.

"Your mother, you know—" he commenced to grumble in Estelle's ear.

She looked at him in a way that pulled him up. "What is that to you? It gives us a moment to ourselves." This was obvious enough. She made the most of it by taking his arm, tottering on those idiotic pin-point heels. With the skirts and slippers women were wearing they were as helpless as Chinese, and when they were dancing you practically had to carry them.

So they made their way into Lady Susan's abode, Ambry praying that she'd give them decent wine. He needed something to go on with. Estelle certainly got on a fellow's nerves. . . .

Letting himself into his rooms, long after dawn, when it was really quite respectably sunny, Ambry took a cold plunge to clear his head. This treatment, while steadying, was only partially successful, for when the inner pulses of youth are running hot and free, excited by movement, by lights, by warmth, by the contagion of the jaded joyousness of a ballroom at the end of a strenuous season, it takes more than a cold douche to

quiet that impetuous throb. These particular pulses, irritated by the touch, by the feeling, by the intense consciousness of Estelle with which she had known how to surround him the entire night, were giving our young man something to think of. If he could still feel this way, if she still had the power to carry him with her, almost off his feet, mightn't there be really something in it? He sat with his hot head in his hands for an appreciable time, his thoughts circling ever closer and closer around that threatening Dark Tower, built of debts, mortised with bills, manned by duns, that raked the entrance to whatever dim, delectable green meadows of solvency might lie beyond its ugly bulk. He ceased to ponder, not being of the stuff that slings slug-horn to lip, defiantly leading a forlorn hope. Not he! Hurt as it might, he clung to Johnstone-Ford as to a plank of salvation. One more cigarette and then he'd turn in. The expected letter would doubtless contain all possible directions and exhortations, that is, if he knew his ancient tutor.

Dodgson eventually brought it to him with the customary cup of weak tea that was supposed to serve as an eye-opener. Ambry, flat on his back, like a tired navvy, unfolded benumbed arms. Yes, it was all there. If he could arrange to lunch with them at their rooms, so much the better. There was enough to begin on at once in the way of neglected secretarial work. Miss Johnstone-Ford was impatient to make his acquaintance. She was filled with hospitable activities and housewifely anxieties on his account. Their life was simplicity itself, but they hoped to make him comfortable. Had he told Ambry that his sister was deep in

a philanthropic enterprise, a scheme to feed poor women and their babies with at least one nourishing meal a day? Ambry made a face. He was confident, with the crude judgment of youth, of such a golden youth, that he could place the good lady at once. He saw her, photographed by a secret, instantaneous process, in a certain gallery open only to his inner eye. It was a simple image, good and gentle, and he need fear no sentimental complications. Thank heavens! for some weeks he'd be free as he'd never really been in his life before. He would be distinctly on his own bat, with no aroma of name or family to hang about him. The thought of A. Holmes caught and fixed him. Well, the sooner the better. By the time he was dressed it would be noon. He dragged himself up.

A copper-coloured rose, pinched at the edges, crumpled as if it were made of paper, had been placed in a tiny glass of water on the dressing-table. He must have dropped it out of his things last night, and Dodgson, the invaluable, the discreet, the sentimental, had cherished it for him. Ambry looked at the pretty, fragile, faded trophy, and forbore to smile. Nevertheless, he left it to blacken in the glass if it saw fit, as, his toilet completed, with a last look around, such as might have been thrown by the disinherited hero, preparing to leave his gilded halls for the obscurity of a South-West slum, Ambry closed the door on his old personality for so long as it should please a certain A. Holmes to keep it dark.

At the last moment, although he had not intended to, he left a telegram with Dodgson to be sent off at once, informing Estelle that he had been forced to

leave town, and didn't quite know when he would be back. After last night, this was almost worse than sending no word at all. She'd never forgive him, but wasn't that what he wanted? Being less sure of this than he cared to admit, he threw himself and his kit into a cab in a tumult of mind that only Ridges Street could subdue.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RIDGES STREET, when you found it, was seen to be a stumpy thoroughfare lying in the outer purlieus of desolate Pimlico. Here were no trees, no awnings, no flower-boxes. Nothing to temper a roaring sun that beat down on broken pavements, on blistered, cracked, soot-stained façades, on open buckets of refuse, on the dirt, the confusion, the staggering decay of a summer slum.

A hundred and fifty odd years ago this quarter of the town was beginning to be occupied by prosperous tradesmen who could afford to themselves a well-built house in a genteel street. Trees flourished here then, in the trim gardens that boasted grass alleys and gooseberry bushes. You will still find the parlours and some of the upper chambers of these houses to be solidly panelled, with deep-set windows and comfortable cupboards; the staircases take a proper curve; you run your hand along a mahogany rail; your feet follow the well-placed flight of steps, worn by who knows what innumerable contacts? Elaborate fanlights over the heavy doors that sprawl open now from dawn to dawn still let in an obscure streak of day through a dreary deposit of soot and cobwebs. Wizen, gnomelike children seem to burst out from every cranny, ready to swarm up a stranger's leg on a voyage of discovery; vague fumes of hot suds (why suds, when no person and no thing has even the deceitful appearance of cleanli-

ness?), and of miserable, greasy cookery hang almost palpably in the well of the staircase; frowsy, battered heads of incredibly ugly women, for true poverty is the most active of disfiguring agents, dart out of the open doors, like ragged turnkeys, at the least unwonted sound; a stupefying air of hopelessness, of incapacity, of hard brutality, of conscious degradation broods over such neighbourhoods as this, making it necessary for the unaccustomed intruder of æsthetic instincts to call upon all his resources of decent feeling to keep him from turning tail at the first onslaught of this inferno upon his highly-cultivated sense organs.

Our exquisite Ambry cast a haggard eye from house to house, wildly seeking the number that Johnstone-Ford had given him. There it was at last, 117, but, heaven be praised! not quite like its drunken neighbours. For 117 was a nosegay in a dust-heap, thanks to fresh paint, green blinds, well-scrubbed steps, a neat brass knocker, a shining, carefully-lettered doctor's bell, and a row of bright, pink geraniums at an upper window.

Ambry heaved down his kit himself and bore it up the steps, with the laudable desire to be in character from the very first moment. A pale-faced little maid with abnormally long, thin arms, opened the door to him and took his name in rather a flutter, leaving him standing in the hall, a stranded but much-interested voyager. The shape of the house pleased his eye, the broad lines, the good moulding on cornice and stair-head, the low, heavy doors at right and left. An agreeable, cool, fresh odour floated down from the upper regions. On the first landing a small muslin curtain moved gently in the languid air from an open window,

bringing relief at once from that stifling oppression he had brought in with him from the summer street.

In a moment the little maid reappeared at the top of the stairs, followed immediately by a tall, thin woman who bent her grey head and asked him in a very sweet, rather odd voice if he would not come up.

"My brother will be so sorry that he is not here to meet you—Mr. Holmes," she hesitated over the name with a droll little intonation, "but he is doubtless delayed by some one of those extraordinary happenings that are a commonplace of our life here. We are both so very happy to welcome you. It will mean so much to John to have you to talk to. I make but a feeble listener, for I always wish to chatter interminably to him about my own little affairs, in which, of course, no one but myself can have any but the most perfunctory interest."

Gently rambling on, her thin hands moving restlessly, now patting the brooch at her neck, now touching an invisible hairpin, now setting a net to rights over the rather unruly fringe of her grey hair, her kind eyes bent quietly, critically, quizzically upon her young guest, Miss Johnstone-Ford led him into the front room on the second storey, apparently fitted to be sitting-room, study, and general meeting-place. It was plain to severity, and spotlessly clean. The panelled walls, the wood scraped and painted, carried no pictures or ornaments; a carpenter had run up deal shelves for the books; papers, notebooks, and writing-gear were arranged on a sort of long standing desk near the window, leaving free a round, polished table drawn up by the empty fireplace where the meals of

the family were evidently served. A lady's rickety little writing-desk stood against the wall, having near it a low chair and a hassock with a worked tapestry top. Half surrounding these objects was a screen upon whose paper sides had been painted a fantastic Roman episode of the Empire—some embarkation on the Tiber from a riverside villa, the black and white squares of the pavement diminishing, very well foreshortened, down to the water's edge. Evidently this bit of the apartment represented the withdrawing-room of the lady of the household. The gay, embroidered petunias on the footstool top, and the pink geraniums outside the muslin-shrouded window, were the only dabs of colour in the cool, encompassing greyness.

Ambry, regarding his hostess with interest, could have smiled at the neat fashion in which Nature, for once unwasteful, had used the brother's features to furnish forth the sister's countenance. You saw the same bony structure, the well-set ears, the beaked nose, but here the slightly narrower brow was covered by a dense fringe of grey hair, the nose, with more generous nostrils, had an oddly engaging upward tilt, the cheeks, the corners of the eyes, unworn by the searching activity of a restless mind, had a certain smooth, almost youthful freshness. She was painfully thin and flat under her little black blouse, and you had a shrewd suspicion that she frequently forgot to eat. Ambry felt a strong liking for her at once, of which, being very feminine, she doubtless became subtly conscious in less time than it takes to write it.

"How you are ever going to manage in your box of a room, I don't know." She threw up her hands

in laughing bewilderment. "The only thing for us to do is to work you so hard that you'll drop asleep before you have a chance to feel the walls closing in on you. Will you come and see it now? Then we'll have luncheon and John will surely be back by that time in a fever of impatience at not having been here to make you welcome in person."

As she spoke, she opened a door masked in the wood-work at one side of the room, and led the way into a species of walled-in corridor, as narrow as a hall, that might once have served as a dressing-closet. The original slit of a window had been enlarged by some previous tenant with an eye to symmetry, so that it now matched the two in the adjoining room. A white cot, a miniature dressing-table, and a chair were all that one could possibly admit, leaving space at the same time for the human occupant. Miss Johnstone-Ford pointed to the bed.

"It looks wobbly, but I assure you it isn't, and you perceive that it is long enough, even for you," she glanced up at the high head beside her. "John made me very particular about that."

"I feel perfectly sure that I shall be as happy as possible here, dear Miss Johnstone-Ford, and as good as gold," said Ambry, warmly and sincerely. "Your offer to take me in, coming just at this time, has made a tremendous difference to me. I really can't tell you how much."

"It is nice of you to swallow us so easily," replied the lady. "You are merely to sleep here, you know. You must use the sitting-room exactly as if it were your own. You have perhaps noticed that each of us

has his little corner. One shall be arranged for you, too, never fear. I have a feeling that we shall indulge in some famous talks. John comes in simply bursting with theories. By the way, how do you find him looking?" She turned to Ambry rather sharply, with a strange little, upward, birdlike look.

"Oh, awfully well, I thought, and tremendously keen on this class of his——"

"Too keen, I'm afraid," said his sister soberly. "Oh, well, we shall see. I'll have your traps brought up. It is immensely decent of you simply to try to get along with a portmanteau after the mass of belongings to which the modern young man accustoms himself. Shall we go in? I think luncheon has been brought up. John's room is directly back of this one, and mine practically corresponds to yours. The third room in the rear we have turned into a bath, with showers and needle douches to keep us in condition."

As she spoke, Ambry involuntarily thought that the poor lady herself would stand a good chance of being knocked over by a properly directed spray, so frail she was.

They found Jenny, the small maid, laying the cloth and producing table furniture from mysterious cupboards and hiding-places. A pleasing odour stole up the staircase, and presently they were sitting down together to an excellent meal of cutlets and fish, green peas and salad. In the midst of it they heard the front door open and close, the sound of a voice in the hall, of footsteps mounting the stairs.

"Here he is at last, poor dear," exclaimed Miss Johnstone-Ford, half rising and dropping her napkin.

Ambry was cordially greeted by his old tutor, who struck him, with his bright eye and flushed cheek, as looking not quite himself. They reseated themselves, and Johnstone-Ford made an attempt merely at eating. After assuring himself that Ambry really felt that he could manage in his straitened quarters, and that he still held to his determination to give them and Ridges Street a trial, he told him that he would explain his work to him this evening, after class. Just at this moment he had something on his mind that he must get into writing. Would Ambry excuse him? All this said rather hurriedly, as if the speaker were under a certain nervous strain, that he was making a more or less violent effort to control. Ambry, of course, fell in at once with his suggestion, and Miss Johnstone-Ford, her eyes fixed on her brother, her poor hands ceaselessly busy with her napkin, pinching, patting, folding, and smoothing, threw herself gallantly at the head of their guest, declaring that she would carry him over the Neighbourhood House, give him a hint of his duties, about which, indeed, she knew quite as much as John, would lead him also to her own Milk Shelter and show him cats and babies, for even a young man should know about such things.

“Oh, yes, my dear boy, you will find Gertrude a far better guide than I this afternoon. But once let me pigeon-hole this matter I spoke of, and to-night we’ll have one of our Homeric discourses.”

While they had been speaking, Jenny had cleared the table, placing thereon plums and nectarines, downy, sun-warmed, perfumed, in a sort of woven lacquer basket, the coffee-machine, tiny cups, cigarettes, and

little clay pots for ashes. With the soothing cloud of their bluish smoke about them, Ford's eyes grew more languid, and Gertrude's hands quieter.

Presently she turned to Ambry. "Shall we start in ten minutes' time? Don't you want to change those beautiful clothes you have on for simpler ones? I know John told you to bring old things. I don't want people to think you are an inquiring visitor I am showing about—a strayed reveller from happier courts. I wish you to get first impressions as one of us, one of our small staff, eh?" She had a most attractive way of throwing her head sideways, and looking up at you. Anyone could see that presently she would be playing Peetybee—dear simple lady! to his Varian. How certain types repeat themselves endlessly!

Ambry laughingly assented, and passed a somewhat agitated ten minutes in changing into the most decayed set of flannels that Dodgson had been able to find. The smallness of the room proved intensely confusing, and when he paused, flushed but at least clad, his eye embraced a frenzied scene. Who would have supposed that one portmanteau could contain so much? Who would have supposed that its varied contents would display such a superhuman agility in seeking individual resting-places from one end of the room to the other? On the bed, or under it, was all one to them. They swarmed over the dressing-table and completely submerged the solitary chair. You waded through a froth of boots to reach the door, and Ambry, taking in the effect with a distraught yet amused eye, for the first time in his life rendered unto Dodgson the things that

were Dodgson's, and mentally raised that invaluable person's wages on the spot.

Returning to the sitting-room, not knowing where else to go, Ambry found Ford standing at his desk, his hand moving easily, quietly, over the paper, covering it with line upon line of his small, firm, crabbed, studentlike script. He looked up with a gentle smile and no appearance of annoyance. The strain was over, now that he was expressing himself in his best-loved medium.

"Try that easy chair, my boy," he suggested vaguely. "The books are there to your hand." Then he sank once more beyond sight and hearing.

Gertrude, coming in softly from the back room, beckoned Ambry out with her. She had pinned on a small, rounded straw hat, coming well over her face, trimmed with a twist of lace, and a little wreath of what looked like elderberries. A cotton parasol was tucked under her arm, and she was drawing on a pair of thin black gloves that showed every ridge and bone, almost every distended vein, in the nervous, restless hands.

"Did you find your room too distressingly small? Jenny is a very clever little person about keeping things in order. I'll send her up now to unpack and arrange for you. If those are your oldest garments, I don't know how I shall ever pass you off as anything but a nobleman in disguise, and a very thin disguise at that. However, one can't help one's physique. There is a case in point in this very neighbourhood. A young woman keeps a dairy, sells you eggs and butter and milk, looking meantime like the freshest, daintiest,

most charming of Watteau shepherdesses. It's all in the lines of her body, in the curves and tints of her face. You never see the frock—plain stuff in winter, or print in summer, no more no less."

Ambry's attention, however, was beginning to wander. He hoped Ford would keep him busy. He'd have less time to regret Dodgson and—other people. . . . She must have his telegram by now. He almost pulled out his watch, but stayed his hand in time and wrenched his thoughts away from the exasperating sweets of Belgrave Square, back to the noisome realities of Ridges Street.

They had been too much engaged in their conversation to notice that their advance on the wooden building with a zinc roof, known as the Neighbourhood House, had many of the special features of a royal progress—a line of slatternly heads at the windows, an escort of doleful urchins at right and left, openly curious, obviously cynical, the wag among them giving a not bad imitation of Ambry's careless stride.

Gertrude, becoming suddenly aware of these frisking youths, turned upon them, called them by name, inquired about the mother of one, the baby-sister of another, plainly a very new acquisition, and, in two minutes, by the exercise of the genuine, honest power she possessed to meet other human beings, no matter how small and impish, on a common, friendly level, had turned the mocking cohorts into a band of youthful friends, eager to accompany them to their destination. Such is a simple woman's simple magic.

The bare rooms of the Guild presented the familiar aspect associated with all such enterprises. They were

clean enough, with their painted floors, their calcimined walls, on which had been tacked coloured supplements of some of the better class of weekly periodicals. The men's reading-room and smoking-room sheltered, even at this hour, certain shuffling individuals, whose slouching backs, disorganized legs, unsteady eyes, and tatterdemalion appearance placed them unerringly in the wide pigeon-hole of the unemployed and the unemployable.

"Nice Johnnies, those," thought Ambry. "Poor devils," he added to himself, after another glance, pity beginning to accomplish her mission within him.

The gymnasium was not badly fitted up. "You might put the boys through their paces here, sometimes," remarked Gertrude. "Poor, little, stunted, underfed souls! To teach them how to breathe would be a step toward arousing in them the desire to do so properly. Something really valuable might follow upon such a beginning."

"Here is John's den, now to be yours." She unlocked a door into a high, narrow room with a single window opening on a blank-looking, melancholy court. A faint odour of dusty papers, of stale tobacco-smoke, of brown soap, made its inevitable impression upon unaccustomed nostrils.

"A bit stuffy here," remarked Gertrude, throwing up the window. She ran her hand through an untidy accumulation of pamphlets, address-books, leaflets, and other signs of anæmic propaganda. "You have to send these things out—I'll give you the special lists. Here is the key to the drawers. Then there will be answers to write to the thousand and one idiotic letters

with which people are continually bombarding us. It is just about time to think about the circulars of appeal for funds, and aid of one kind and another with which we, in our turn, annoy our friends of philanthropic or sentimental tendencies. Begging letters you must bring to me, for a time at least, until you can distinguish the faked from the genuine. It becomes an art."

Ambry took it in, feeling not disinclined to set to work at once. But his companion said that she knew John would prefer to start him in person to-morrow morning. "I must take a look in on my cats and babies," said she, "and I want you to see them with me."

They went out into the hall again where they encountered a plain, stout, fresh-faced woman in a blue-and-white checked cotton, her arms full of what looked like mattress-coverings.

"How do you do, Miss Naylor? This is my brother's assistant, Mr. Holmes. He has run down for a few weeks to help us out. How is everything going?"

Brisk Miss Naylor would have wrung her hands, you felt sure, if they had not been otherwise employed. So she rolled her china-blue eyes and said the children would be the death of her. They had stormed the Library last night, and little Miss Dickinson was afraid of them.

"Pooh!" returned the intrepid Gertrude. "I'll settle them. Who was the leader?"

"That wicked Pilson boy."

"He's not wicked, the least little bit," replied Miss Johnstone-Ford with some heat. "He has plenty of energy——"

"That he has," darkly admitted Naylor.

"Which is a good sign," continued Gertrude, "in this depressed, diseased spot. If your little Dickinson had a scrap of diplomacy, he'd eat out of her hand. The next time they storm the Library, get up on a desk or a table and begin to tell them stories. Pepper them enough, *à la* Monte Cristo, and you'll have them hanging on your words, three thick, begging for more. Oh, that Pilson family, I know it well! The mother does try, but a babe every year is a trifle upsetting. I met a very small Pilson on my rounds the other day and inquired after his mother. She had just been confined, poor woman, and the small Pilson confessed to having a new brother. 'Another baby?' I exclaimed, about to ask its name, following the etiquette in such cases. 'No, ma'am,' said my small Pilson, 'it's the same old baby, but ma calls it Henry this time.' Now, who wouldn't love that family, Miss Naylor?"

Ambry's laugh and Miss Naylor's delighted gurgle filled the corridor.

"Ah, if we all had a way with us like you, Miss Gertrude, this would be a different house. They do depress me so sometimes, these poor, sickly bad-lots, that I often think I'll have to go back to nursing rich people again."

"Never, never!" cried Gertrude, "that would be so unimaginative. We need you here. Don't desert us." She patted the mattress-coverings, being as near as she could get to Miss Naylor's motherly person. "But we must be going."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Holmes," put in the nurse primly, thinking meanwhile how elegantly she

would describe him to little Miss Dickinson. Ambry's laugh and his inches had wrought their usual havoc.

"Now for my pet fad," said Gertrude, as they continued their way to the street. "When John had to leave Oxford, I made up my mind that I would start here in London the small milk-mission, as one might call it, that has been so successfully tried in America. But I determined to widen my sphere, so as to include the homeless and battered pussy. Large dairy-farms, for an advertisement; our old friend, the professional philanthropist, if I may call him so; and other souls, out of the simple goodness of their hearts, supply us with pure milk. We have a pasteurizing plant, and so provide for the weak and ailing babies. We dole out so much each morning to as many clients as we can handle. A couple of nurses I know having volunteered, we keep open house, or open *crèche*, for the youngsters whose mothers go out working by the day. These are the little strug-for-lifers that you are about to be shown. In addition, I started a kitchen last winter when there was so much frightful distress, and now we give a decent meal each midday—meat soup, a vegetable, macaroni, and bread—to the mothers of our youthful pensioners."

"What about the tabby-cats?" asked Ambry.

"Wait and see," laughed Gertrude from under the minuscule shade of her little cotton parasol.

They had left simmering, too-odorous Ridges Street behind them on their left, and were now committed to a quieter thoroughfare, poor still but not pullulating with infants and refuse. Two, rather high, brick buildings, let out into flats or tenements, overshadowed

between them a trumpery wooden house set back a few feet from the street, far enough to allow for an expanse of sickly-brownish soil in which thin grass blades painfully grew on either side of a boarded path that led from the wooden gate to the small front door. All this gave a fallacious, villalike appearance to an abode that had lost caste along with its neighbourhood. A small sign erected on the wooden paling announced the hours when milk would be forthcoming, and as these were now long past the gate was soberly latched, the house door closed.

As they went up the path Gertrude waved and nodded to a pretty white-capped girl whose head appeared between the curtains at an open window.

"We are going around to see the cats first," she said. The other smiled and drew back.

The path continued along the side of the house, against whose stained boards morning-glories had been laborously trained on stout threads, until it ended in a fair-sized plot of ground, once a garden, for an acacia still threw its thin shade across the stretch of soil, now too filled with cinders, too sour with drainage, too fatigued and old, even like the rest of the world down here, to hold up its head with the grassy green and flowery crown of earlier, happier years.

"Not a thing will grow here, as you see," said Gertrude, with a hopeless wave of her hand, "except our faithful acacia and that clump of catnip over in the corner. But the pussies don't mind; it's a pleasant enough stamping-ground for them."

As she spoke, her furry wretches came creeping, slouching, or sauntering from their little rickety

shelters, from behind boxes, from under bits of carpet, eyes shining, tails erect, drawing nearer and nearer to the feet of their patroness.

"Oh, I say, you know," cried Ambry, "it's as good as Circe to watch you. Look at that big one-eyed chap with the jowl."

The creatures circled around her with loud, cracked purrs, arching their scrubby backs against her feet, rubbing their battle-worn visages on her black skirt, with that ingratiating lowering and turning of the head that the cat alone makes use of in his hours of ease. She patted them indiscriminately, giving, perhaps, an extra tweak to the elaborate whiskers of the one-eyed one, manifestly the Sultan of this doleful court.

"This is Richard Cœur-de-Lion, poor old thing. He has some good blood in him."

"They must raise a devil of a row at nights," remarked Ambry.

"Not so bad as you would expect, they tell me. They are too old and feeble. Also, the neighbourhood itself, being distinctly animated after dark, their squalls are lost in the general pandemonium. One of them, Richard, for instance, in a more genteel *milieu* would, undoubtedly, raise the dead or the devil—or both. But come in and see the babies now. Take it as you would a dose of medicine. You need not touch them, nor need you say a word. I will let you off easily. You're just here for a bob in."

"Well, Elsie, how are the youngsters to-day?"

They were inside by this time and the pretty be-capped nurse had come into the hall to greet them.

"Nurse Peters, this is Mr. Holmes who has come down to help my brother. If I know young men, he's more afraid of one of your charges than of an enraged Indian elephant."

Pretty Elsie blushed and laughed. "Do come in. They are particularly good and amusing now, for they have just been fed."

They saw a large, airy, white room filled with toddling, nodding, or sleeping small beings in clean little frocks and bibs, anchored in cribs, in chairs, or in big, soft baskets. They might easily have provided models for a great *crèche* frieze, if such a thing could be undertaken nowadays, their little forms bound against the clear, cool, light stone with ribbons of yellow and blue. As it was, they gurgled and ate and slept quite happily through the long day, thus gathering sufficient strength to withstand the hardships of the close, summer nights, too tightly snuggled into the dingy yet warm bosoms of their own families. There was a faint odour of hot milk and orris powder in the air, and altogether the roomful presented a pleasant, drowsy, healthy aspect.

"Jolly little chaps," Ambry was understood to say, keeping, with a natural male instinct, as near the door as possible. How easily women took to such things! There was one of the more alert infants having a tremendous time with Gertrude's finger from which she had slipped her glove. The pretty nurse carried on her shoulder a white bundle from which tiny hands, as vaguely organized as baby starfish, stuck out strugglingly into the air. The two women were talking in important undertones, doubtless settling some knotty point of infantile cuisine.

From the sad menagerie in the desolate garden you could catch certain grumbling notes, certain long-drawn cat-sighs. Ambry's thoughts began to wander, but he jerked them back with a proper instinct of self-preservation to hear Gertrude say, "How odd, it always comes so regularly. Are we really short? Hasn't the new Wimbledon milk come either? That is nearer. Shall I run up there and inquire?"

"Oh, I don't believe that is necessary," replied Nurse Elsie hesitatingly. "Still, if something doesn't come this afternoon, we'll be rather in a hole for supper."

"I'll go, of course," said Gertrude, drawing on her glove. "If the Wimbledon milk can't get here, I'll order some on our own account. Good-bye, the babies are loves, and Mr. Holmes has enjoyed his privileges enormously."

She swept him out with a laughing farewell to the white-capped guardian of the sanctuary.

Standing in front of the wooden gate Gertrude wrinkled her brows at him in mock distress. "What a tale you will have to confide to John's sympathetic ear to-night! I can hear you say: 'My dear fellow, I came down to help you, you know, and I shall be most glad to stick to my bargain, but you really must keep me out of the clutches of your worthy sister—an estimable woman, doubtless, but—!' Then you will throw up your hands in a frenzied appeal to the gods."

"Rather not!" exclaimed Ambry. "I'm having the most splendid afternoon, you know. It is most good of you to take me under your wing in this way. I can't be too grateful. Lead on; I am yours; you

can't shake me off. What next? But first let me open your sunshade." He did it very neatly, having had experience.

"Oh, it's only a bit of an errand almost in the neighbourhood—at least not far off. Our regular milk supply has not come, and the new Wimbledon offering is mysteriously delayed likewise. It seems that a delightful woman down there has a tiny toy dairy that produces more milk than she knows what to do with. She sends the surplus into a certain local shop to be given away to homeless cats and needy babies. As my Shelter cares for both, the little shopkeeper—I'll tell you about her in a moment—is to forward the Wimbledon supply to us. This was to be the first day, but it has not appeared, and a dark cloud is hanging over our suppers in consequence. Do you mind walking with me to the shop? It is one of the prettiest places imaginable—all white, scrubbed paint, blue tiles, delicious pats of butter, thick cream——"

"Jove! You make me ravenous for my tea."

"We'll have a specially festal one, I promise you. You certainly deserve it."

"To show how abnormally clever I am," went on Ambry, "may I hazard the guess that the mistress of the delectable shop is the Watteau shepherdess you spoke of this morning?"

"O youth!" cried Gertrude, "how things stick in your memory! You are perfectly right. 'Tis the very little woman. I hope she'll be in so that you may see her."

Ambry, being human, hoped with her, and said so.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEY turned into Countess Street, and Bina's window, set with its freshest wares, shaded by its awning, perfumed with its pots of roses, made its customary gracious appeal to more than one of the senses.

"Isn't it pretty? Look at that ducky basket of eggs!" whispered Gertrude on the threshold. The foolish little adjective that everyone was using in those days struck upon Ambry's ear, dragging a veritable living-picture with it—the feminine mob in front of Harrod's, an idiotic turban on some stick of a girl, and Estelle, close beside him in that blue-and-white dress, stuck over with buttons—Estelle, asking him if he didn't think it was a duck. Good heavens! after turning tail and running away from the girl, he found her image haunting his mind as it had never done when he was supposed to be tied to her chariot wheels.

An old gentleman in spectacles, seated upon a small rush chair near the little counter that bore the shining scales and the paper bags, reading a serious-looking calf-bound tome, was the only occupant of the shop. He looked up mildly as their entrance interfered with the light, but at first appeared to regard them merely as wandering shades who would go out again if you didn't speak to them. This desired exit not taking place, and Gertrude's eye being firmly fastened upon him, he came back, with an effort, from dim tracts of

fascinating speculation, to a recognition of the immediate human needs of impatient human customers. He now rose, with a certain old-fashioned manner of courtesy, and inquired what Gertrude might be wanting.

"Is Miss Panta in by any chance? I mean the young lady I am in the habit of seeing about here."

Panta was very sorry, but she had stepped out for a few moments on some errand connected with the shop. To telephone to Wimbledon Station, he thought he had heard her say. Was there not something he could do?

"Ah," said Gertrude, relieved. "If she is telephoning to Wimbledon, that is exactly my affair. I am Miss Johnstone-Ford to whose Shelter the Wimbledon milk is to be sent—not having been delivered to-day . . . came to inquire. . . . Something to replace it, you know."

Gertrude's interest in the conversation having died, she drawled vaguely to a finish, her pleased eye meantime taking in the arrangements of the little shop, the cream, the white cheeses, the cowslip-butter, the fat pink roses.

Ambry, rather filling up the doorway, idle hands in the pockets of his loose grey flannels, was engaged in scanning the horizon when he received a shock akin to that of the Ancient Mariner as he sighted his albatross. For, where on earth had he seen this charming being, in the light, clear gown, with the floating scarf, the loose gloves, the flimsy little hat on the thick, curling hair—such eyes, such skin, such lips!—who was bearing down on the shop, and, incidentally, on him? His gaze held

her boldly as she drew nearer and nearer. He looked at her slender feet, right—left, right—left—ah, he had it now! She was the pretty little foreign-looking woman, perhaps a Russian, whom he had caught in passing under the lamp in Wilton Place. Was it only last night? It seemed ages ago. By Jove, she was coming in. He stepped back in a certain confusion. Bina looked up and knew him at once, unlikely as his presence was—crazily unlikely in this particular spot. But, being a woman, you did not catch her off her guard so easily, and she turned a sweet, properly blank enough mask, first on Ambry, then, with a movement of smiling recognition, on Miss Johnstone-Ford.

“I am so sorry you have been perhaps annoyed by the delay of the Wimbledon milk,” she began, capturing the flighty ends of her scarf to draw it more closely around her shoulders, thus unconsciously outlining a very pretty bit of modelling. “The station people tell me that the trouble has been on the railways. It will be delivered from moment to moment now.”

“It is very kind of you to take so much trouble, Miss Panta,” said Gertrude, patting Bina’s hand. She always loved to stroke soft, ingratiating creatures, either pussy-cats, babies, or young women.

“Will you let me send you some of our own milk for this afternoon? There will be tea and supper to think of at the Shelter, will there not?” added Bina. She was intensely conscious of being in Ambry’s atmosphere, as he took good care she should be, but she did not show it, intrigued as she was by his unexplained presence in the shop. Ah, he was not like the nice Varian who had come in with Quin, so boyishly, so

frankly, so modestly! You could never have a quiet, jolly tea with this one in the cosy back room. He was too overpowering; he would make one mouthful of you, and you would be submerged, not caring very much to save yourself, perhaps, letting yourself be engulfed like that poor little Anie. The whole story came back to her as she babbled on to Gertrude how dear good eggs were. Wasn't it only last night that they had seen him in the circles where red carpets and footmen were everyday articles of furniture, with the beautiful dark Estelle who had hung on his arm and looked at him with such impelling, possessive eyes? Whatever was he doing in this *galère*? If she had only learned how to use her cloud-current, then would she indeed have lain at the heart of this mystery. He certainly had the quality of making her very conscious of him, but this merely agitated without pleasing her. Quin would be so amused when she told him. They seemed ever on the point of catching living threads, vital wires from this group of lives in the small circle bounded by Belgrave Square, Wilton Place, and Wimbledon.

"Oh, no, it keeps perfectly well in an air-tight jar," she heard herself explaining to nice Miss Johnstone-Ford.

Gertrude looked at Ambry, amused at his silence. "We must have some cream for that famous tea of ours. Will you give me a small pot?" she said, turning to Bina. "I have been dragging poor Mr. Holmes from cats to babies all the afternoon till he is quite exhausted."

"Very jolly little chaps they are," remarked Ambry, looking steadily at Bina, "and no wonder, fed on milk

that passes through this delightful shop of yours. It's the most amazing place; things look simply delicious."

"Don't they?" chimed in Gertrude, carefully nursing her wrapped-up little jar. "Come over and see my babes, Miss Panta, whenever you can. Good-bye, thank you so much for telephoning. Mrs. Edmonton and her Wimbledon dairy will do great things for us."

So they got themselves out of the shop, Bina half-smiling farewell to the top button of Ambry's coat, it being quite too much of an effort to lift your eyes to other people's eyes when the people in question happen to be so outrageously tall. There may have been other reasons, too, but one needn't go into that. But why did Miss Johnstone-Ford refer to Sir Ambry Nunholme as Mr. Holmes? Bina screwed up her pretty face over this problem, as she tucked away her hat and scarf and gloves. Here was a pricking little mystery with which to torment Quin.

Ambry, too, had been given something to wonder about. Who was this Wimbledonian, Mrs. Edmonton? Varian's mother? Hadn't Varian said, by the way, that Anie had left town to escape his, Ambry's, baleful influence, and surely Wimbledon had been the asylum mentioned. He racked his brains. Estelle never spoke of her aunt, and he, for his part, never engaged in general conversation with Lady Cassock. Their intercourse had ever been restricted to the subacid-sulky, the jibe and the counter-jibe of two exceedingly antagonistic personalities. Consequently, with them he had lived ever in the moment, their people and their past

being as veiled as if they had been music-hall *artistes*. His pace and Estelle's had been so tumultuously rapid that they had had ears and eyes for no one but themselves.

"Did you ever know a Varian Edmonton?" inquired Ambry, as he insisted upon relieving Gertrude of the cream.

"Don't squabble with me," she said feebly, as she handed it over to him. They both laughed, having become great friends.

"He was at Oxford. John licked us both into shape. He is an awfully good chap, really 'good,' I mean. I am wondering if your Mrs. Edmonton of Wimbledon may not turn out to be his mother."

"John will know. He never lets any of his old boys slip away entirely, if he can help it. You are aware how wonderfully he trapped you."

"I'm jolly glad he did," said Ambry quickly.

"You see," went on Gertrude, "I never knew his boys all the time he was at Oxford. I was living with a relative in Scotland. Poor old auntie's death two years ago left me free at last to be with John. By the way, did I exaggerate the charms of my little Watteau shepherdess? Wasn't she taking in that bit of a hat?"

"She is one of the prettiest women I think I have ever seen," replied Ambry in a rich tone of conviction. He was on the point of saying that he had encountered her before, but decided not to. "The old gentleman, too, seems to be very much of a character. They are not in the least the stuff of which shopkeepers are made. They are not English, I imagine."

"I have understood vaguely that they came here from Italy, but they are certainly not Italians."

"Father and daughter?" asked Ambry.

"Yes, and there is another member of the household, a cousin, a nephew—a tall, slim, very distinguished person indeed, I assure you."

"Um, a queer lot," said Ambry, going on to speak of something else. "So that was the chap with the figure," he thought to himself.

After they had reached home, and Ambry had had a smoke, Gertrude threw over her shoulder to him: "We don't dress for dinner, you know. John's class wouldn't put up with it, we were given to understand. Will dining at seven make it seem like a nursery tea to you?"

Ambry, on the threshold of his narrow cell, declared that she was not to worry her hospitable soul about him—that he was perfectly happy. What a choice of words, he thought to himself, a shade disgustedly, a moment later, sitting on his bed that, thanks to Gertrude, really didn't wobble, his sole chair being otherwise engaged. On the instant, like a child, he was invaded by a cold discomfort that meant homesickness—homesickness, be it confessed, for the luxurious comforts of Wilton Place, for the careful ministrations of the peerless Dodgson—homesickness for his abundant liberty, his freedom to give way to whatever silly whim might seize him—to be trivial, to be sulky, to be bored—here he was really much nicer than was natural. It might prove a trifle wearing in the long run, but you simply had to play up to what Gertrude expected of you. She was the most appealing of good women, with her

kind, innocent eyes, her preposterous fringe, and those thin, incapable, restless hands. Ambry drove his own into his pockets, and regarded gloomily the old, familiar faces of his boots, ranged in a smart though rather staggering line by the inexperienced touch of the young Jenny.

What had he got himself into, and why? To have run away from a girl whom you found yourself thinking of every minute seemed sheer waste of time. What could she have imagined when she read that idiotic telegram of his? After last night—heavens, only last night! it seemed at least a month ago—such a message was as brutal as if he had struck her. But, if he lost her, wasn't that what he was after? Apparently not, to judge by the sickish wave of anger, of pain, of miserable, thwarted longing that stole up through heart and brain, cauterizing, perhaps, but not soothing. Oh, hang it all! Life was becoming too complicated.

Estelle, for her part, after driving home in the dawn, with every nerve sending tumultuous, seductive messages to that proud high head, scratched off her famous letter to Anie, being still girlish enough to find relief in a confidential outpouring to no matter how unsympathetic an ear. Estelle had always regarded Anie, though actually the elder of the two, as weak and young, full of silly, airish fancies. However, in such an event as this, she might possibly be of some use. To get Anie on her side, instead of on mamma's, in the struggle that she knew was coming, might just possibly be worth while. She didn't think this all out coolly at four o'clock of the clear, softly-shining summer morning, but it was subconsciously active as she scrawled away,

with a simple delight in recalling, for poor Anie's benefit, as intensely as she was able, the rather overpowering sensations that Ambry had managed to arouse in her that night by word and look and touch. Estelle decided then, in her own overbearing mind, that she would marry him, whether there was any money to go on or not. Other people did it every day. Funds could be found. Poor Estelle, having always had everything she wanted, and having absorbed from childhood the Belgravian atmosphere, was as incapable as a small, bright, engaging kitten of judging anything from a reasonable, financial standpoint. Conceive her blind rebellion and her cold rage at being dragged down from these blissful, airy summits, intoxicating in their light and their freedom, by Ambry's shuffling telegram, announcing his departure, with no string of an address left hanging out by which he might be jerked back to London and to her.

Ah, she would make him smart for this! He should pay to the uttermost farthing for these unsteady hands, these dry lips, this hot, spinning head of hers. She felt herself quite capable of calling a taxi, of storming Wilton Place, and wrenching his address from a pliable Dodgson, had there been anything to gain by such radical methods. No, that was just what he would expect her to do, so she wouldn't do it. Let him wait for a word or a sign from her in whatever beastly Continental hole he'd flown to. He wanted her as much as she wanted him; he'd come crawling back. To give him his head and not to fuss would seem to be the dictates of prudence. Be prudent! That was what he was always harping on; well, let him have it then—

oh, as silent and as prudent as you please! Meanwhile, there was the afternoon to face with mamma and her warring legions, her dozens of stupid engagements, and—this torn telegram, rolled into a disgusting little ball by furious, hot fingers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IF it seems to be always teatime, in the cool, pleasant, shady room back of the shop, that is only because we should never catch anyone there at earlier hours when trade is brisk for Bina's nimble fingers, when Quin is off on mysterious errands of his own, or teaching the rudiments of the art of dancing to a handful of gloomy little groundlings with a hungry eye on future engagements with the opera ballet; or when Panta is trailing his tired old feet in and out of his dark, dampish, paper and leather-scented haunts along Shaftesbury Avenue, or in even less alluring emporiums, hidden away back of the markets.

But the sacred tea-hour always drew them inevitably together with its scented thread. Bina would trot in first to set open the other window, or to lower a shadowy curtain—Quin hated too much light—or to stick some more roses in the big jar, bending over them a face as fresh, as delicately pink as they. Then the little table was rolled into position, the cups and saucers laid, the water set to boil on the spirit-lamp. Then, if there were as yet no sign of the others, and the shop still kept its somnolent ease, the wick of the lamp was turned down a bit, and a morsel of Italian embroidery was taken out of its nest in the pretty cretonne box, to lie in Bina's lap, to be held up this way and that in slender, capable fingers, to be speared with a shining needle, to be bound over and over, like poor Gulliver, with lilliputian

threads, to be twisted and knotted and pulled till finally a delightful garland of grape clusters and wreathed staves began to crawl about the edge of the close, yellowish linen. Its pace was but feeble, as Bina never worked on it unless she was alone, for talking goes but ill with the purgatory of anxious counting of threads into which this species of embroidery plunges you.

Ah, there they came, together this time; Panta with two books tied in a strap, Quin with his hat in his hand, the fine head bare, the brown throat discovered by the low, soft collar of the silk shirt. They seemed very much interested, and even stopped aggravatingly in the doorway to finish what they were saying. They should have no tea if they didn't let her into their confidence at once. They met this ultimatum with a disarming cheerfulness, telling her that they were simply bursting with their news. They controlled themselves admirably, however, until each had his own cup well in hand. There are strawberries, too, lying in a leafy covert arranged in old-fashioned champagne glasses whose slender stems carried proudly this green and red *panache*. Quin pretended to gloat over them, and Panta balanced his cup upon his knees where his still unstrapped treasures rested.

"Out with it!" commanded Bina, smiling from one to the other. "Remember, Quin, Panta and I did not keep you waiting that day when your wonderful Ambry, incognito like a prince on his travels, dropped in upon us from the skies."

"Rather not," retorted an amused Quin, mutely begging for another cup of tea. "Both of you fell upon me so suddenly, both of you talked so charmingly

and so rapidly at one and the same time, that you will recollect it was almost ten minutes before I got it through my poor old tired head—awfully stupid of me, I confess—what had really happened. For quite three of them I laboured under the impression that there had been a frightful railway smash-up between Wimbledon and London, and that Ambry, our magnificent Ambry, had been mysteriously—found drowned, wasn't it?—in a milk can!"

Bina's eyes danced. "Quin, you villain, you know how frightfully I am under your thumb, since you dare to talk in this fashion while I actually have your cup and could cut off supplies on the instant. But I am much too weak and loving, you see." She brought him his cup and stood looking down at him. He saw only too plainly, but not quite as the little lady meant.

He took up his tale. "The plot thickens, and we are in the centre of it. With Ambry, in transparent disguise, almost at our very doors in the rôle of Cat-and-Baby inspector under the guidance of your friend, Miss Johnstone-Ford, complications are certainly to be looked for, since the other end of the kite, the Wimbledonian section, is bent upon paying you a visit, my dear." He paused dramatically to let this sink in. Bina rounded her eyes, like an inquiring, rather timid, child, and said: "Oh, not only Varian, but the others too?"

"Very much so. First, mother, who wishes to see the unusual, pretty little woman,"—here Quin bowed elaborately—"who dispenses the riches of the Wimbledonian cows. Oh, Varian has painted you well, my

child. One can see that. Secondly, poor young Anie, who is recovering daily in the gentle atmosphere of that rather remarkable woman, Mrs. Edmonton, she, too—Anie, I mean—is filled with a burning curiosity to see the genius of the shop of which she cherishes an agreeable recollection, especially of our somewhat unusual curtains, I understand.”

“Quin, I could shake you! Are you making this up? What have you been about, you two? Panta, you’ll tell me like a darling, won’t you?”

“I am just exactly as much of a darling as Panta,” interrupted Quin, “and I insist upon your hearing every choice particular from my lips alone.”

“I pant for them!” cries Bina, maliciously leaving it vague as to whether she meant lips or particulars.

“You see, my dear,” began Panta, “we ran across that nice lad, Varian. Quin had picked me up in Trafalgar Square, and we were in Buckingham Palace Road when our young friend hailed us. We were so near his rooms that nothing would do but we must step in for a moment to get our breath. This we did very agreeably over some—what was it, Quin?”

“Hock and Seltzer.”

“Then I looked at his books—he has an unusual collection for one so young—while Quin and he talked, and the details of this visit of his mother and cousin were arranged. He wished most politely to be very particularly recalled to your mind.”

“I like him so much better than Ambry,” said Bina dreamily. “Ambry would make furious love to you, would snatch at you, sweep you off your feet, and then let you dangle while that eye of his roved elsewhere.”

"From what I have gathered of our young man, that is a very excellent, thumb-nail sketch of him," said Quin, "due to a woman's intuition and a five-minute interview. Now, to return to the impending visit. Varian asked, very prettily, if he might be allowed to bring in his mother and cousin next week, on some day to be selected by you, in order that they might make the acquaintance of Miss Bina Pantà, and, incidentally, that of the agreeable bibliophile, Mr. Pantà, and of the odd, long-legged personage who seems to have no visible occupation whatsoever, at least none that can be referred to in polite society, sandwichmen and dancing-jacks being quite too low."

"Varian never hinted that," exclaimed Bina hotly.

"No, no, my child," laughed Quin soothingly. "I was merely improvising on my own particular *leit-motif*."

"When shall it be, then?" cried Bina, becoming hospitably interested. "We must have Rug-Pug on the spot to mind the shop, as it would not be nice at all to be bobbing in and out while they are here. There will be three of them, and three of us." Bina cast a calculating eye upon what might pompously be called the seating capacity of the old, quiet, brown room. "Two on the sofa, one on Pantà's leather throne, that makes three; my little sewing-chair four," checking them off on her fingers.

"I can always twine myself about this stool, you know," put in Quin, amiably anxious to be helpful.

"You could, like a dear, I know," replies Bina, "but we should all be tripping over your lovely legs. No, two seats must be produced from upstairs. That's

not a bad chair in your room, is it, Quin—the one with the lyre back?”

“’Tis a perfectly good chair,” was his reply, “save for its tendency to take nips out of your shoulder blades, if you don’t sit in it just so. I’ll bring it down.”

“That makes five,” counted Bina conscientiously, “and that *prie-dieuish* thing by my bed will do for me. We must have two little tables instead of one, and flowers that will not fight with the strawberries.”

Bina sank into a housewifely muse, Panta assumed his spectacles, and, with a leisurely luxuriousness of anticipation, began to unstrap his treasure-trove, while Quin, in his favourite position on the rug, his back against the side of the empty grate, his legs in a graceful, if not neat, sprawl, his hands in his loose coat pockets, rested and dreamed with half-closed, tired, summer-dazzled eyes. He amused himself by seeing again, quite plainly, Varian’s rooms in Cambridge Street, with their scholarly litter, the big table drawn up near the window, the books upon books climbing up the walls, the copies of Italian pictures, the curious little seventeenth-century, coloured wax medallions with their rather repellent look of life and vivacity. The aspect of the room was a shade precious, a shade precociously cultivated, in the famous “Oxford manner,” but that was a fault of youth, something a few years and a little rough-and-ready experience would correct. Let the boy have his Italian spoils, his books and his papers, let him be just a little self-conscious and dandified in his pursuit of the true and the beautiful. He had the root of the matter in him—the real fire was there, ready to flame up, pure and clear, ready to burn through the

pretty, concealing, decorative crust, at one or two good puffs from that world-bellows into which the *Zeitgeist* knows so well how to blow his potent breath.

Then Quin's idle, somnolent thoughts wandered to Ambry and his mysterious descent upon Ridges Street—to see his old tutor, evidently, but why? Fear of the beautiful, storm-cloud girl, perhaps, had winged his feet. But flight was useless. This Quin knew. Estelle had marked down Ambry for her own, and she'd get him, too. How absurd it all was, and yet what an itching interest the pull and set of the current in all these dissimilar lives could rouse in the detached observer! He would take an unofficial stroll some day in the direction of Ridges Street to see what wires he could tap. The Wimbledon friends must remain meat only for his ordinary Cubical faculties, but Ambry, with his conquering stare, his high head, and his undeniable charm, should give up the most secret clues of his cherished mechanism, if Quin were ever to cross his path again. The cloud-current, feebler as it was growing, could still answer for that.

The men were so quiet that Bina had absently taken up her embroidery in order to round out a minute grape, as small as the head of an ordinary pin, that was to finish off the rich little cluster, pinched and puffed and worked and dotted, all in the tortured linen. This done, admired at arm's length with one eye shut, and carefully embossed, and Bina was ready for instruction or amusement.

Poor Quin was so horribly quiet; she could see it in his pose. She looked at him sharply, just a trifle anxiously. Could he have fallen asleep?

Conscious of her gaze, as he would have been had he lain in the icy Caucasus, Quin opened his eyes and stared drowsily at her.

"Confess you thought me asleep," he said.

She nodded, drawing up the stool to sit beside him. He wanted, childishly, to put his head in her lap, but had enough sense to see the folly of such a move. Did both of them feel the least little bit too much aware of one another?

Simultaneously they turned upon poor Panta and wrested him from his philosophic dream.

"Panta, dear, you are falling asleep," cries Bina.

This was indignantly denied.

"Let me have him, Panta," says Quin, putting up a lazy hand for the volume, and assuming his old position on the rug.

"These chaps are devils of fellows for coining words. If their thought itself were only clear, they could draw upon sufficient treasures in this majestic English tongue, I wot, but they don't. The weak point in your friend's celestial armour, Panta," he went on, "seems to me to be a belittling of life, of everyday experience, to the glorification of what he himself confesses to be, as yet, a mere 'blind' swinging."

"It is blind, of course," broke in Panta, "but only with the blindness of—of a new-born kitten's eye. The organ of sight is there, packed away quite complete, but the moment is not yet ripe for the awakening. Once grasp that you are swinging, although your frame be empty, yet it is there to be filled, pressed down and running over, with the quintessence of all experience—of more than you have ever dreamed—when its

growth is completed, when its hour strikes. In this final synthesis, when the flood that now surges *out* of the frame shall sweep back *into it*, 'you' will be as a god. He can say no more."

Quin rested his head on his hand and took this in.

"That pleases me enormously," he said. "If you follow his thought as you have done, there is certainly a very heady sense of exhilaration, together with the intellectual pleasure in a whopping generalization to which we are all more or less susceptible. But, being very man, I must still register my normal complaint that sheer life—the wonder and mystery of sex, the ravishment of the senses, the homely pleasures and pains of daily experience—*terre à terre* I grant you, if you will—that all these are slurred over, regarded as of small account by your philosopher, blind as all his tribe. Ah, the most insignificant of lovers could teach him his place! The world, to your man, seems but a place where human beings drag through a kind of shadowy existence; it is but a species of stage setting for certain lives, lived at second hand, as though through the mind of a Balzac or a Stendhal. This anæmic, 'literary' way of regarding life is distinctly reprehensible, if not stupid. You will grant that much. If life be 'jarred' and 'secondary,' how can we ourselves, as Bina, Panta, and Quin, be anything but secondary, too? See how that loosens every check; how the barriers sink; how the waters rush in! We'd be submerged, drowned, as your blind kittens, before ever our eyes could open."

"You forget that the foolish flood will turn when the hour strikes—but not an instant before, Quin—will turn and be transfused, transmuted, transfigured,

and glorified, so that you would never know it for the same old ridiculous 'life' we thought so mad, so bad——”

“But, oh, how sweet it was!” drawled Quin, following Bina with dreamy eyes.

Panta shut the book with a smart clap, and took off his spectacles.

“Of course, you are far beyond me,” half-pouted a slightly-bored Bina. “That bad old philosopher-man may write till he’s blind, but that won’t give him his meals, his tobacco, a nice warm fire for the winter evenings, and someone to sew up the holes in his clothes.”

Unanswerable argument of the Eternal Feminine! She has you there, every time. You come sneaking back to the snug inglenook and to her, when the shoes are worn through and the stomach empty, the head light with pain and fatigue, and the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow as despairingly out of reach as ever.

“But when the poor, bemused philosopher does see the error of his ways,” remarks Quin, “then shall we sing:

*‘Now winter nights enlarge
The number of their hours;
And clouds their storms discharge
Upon the airy towers.
Let now the chimneys blaze
And cups o’erflow with wine,
Let well-tuned words amaze
With harmony divine!’*

*Now yellow waxen lights
Shall wait on honey love——’ ”*

His nimble baritone had carried him very agreeably thus far, only to fail with him in mid-air. He came down again to earth and the hearthrug to hear Bina say:

“But why do you leave off at the prettiest part, just when the candles are being lighted and the love-making beginning?”

“Why, indeed?” moaned Quin. “Heaven knows I’d like to go on, my dear child, but I have forgotten the rest. Come now, I had quite lost sight of our young Varian. I am to send him a line when a certain Miss Panta makes up her little mind what day next week she will be receiving. Get out your calendar, wrinkle your childish forehead, tap your lips with a pencil, meditate, cogitate—conjugate—only, speak up!”

How he loved her when he teased her! How he loved the soft, sidelong look in the dark eyes, the biting of the lips to keep back the smile, the quick repression throughout the whole length of the elastic young body, the reining in of every petulant movement! Then she let herself go with a ferocious menace.

“It would serve you jolly well right, Master Quin, if Panta and I were to box your ears.”

“Why me?” inquired Panta mildly.

“Because I’m not strong enough to do it properly by myself. However, since it is Varian (intense emphasis) who asks me, I shall make haste to set the happy day.” Tremendous activity with calendar, notebook, and pencil. “We are so overrun with engagements,”

she smiled at the two men, "that I don't see how we can possibly make it before Wednesday. Shall it be Wednesday, then?"

"Alas, ah me," groaned Quin, "I've promised to help Heffendorfer that afternoon with a particularly unpromising batch. Could we say Thursday?"

"But perfectly," declared Bina. "Send Varian his little line to that effect. Before Rug-Pug goes to-night, I'll make arrangements with her. It will be pleasant to see his mother, won't it, Quin?" Such innocent, inquiring eyes raised to yours!

"Why so infernally pleasant to see his mother, I wonder?" Quin asked himself savagely. "She's only getting back at me, of course. I'll wring her little neck!"

But all he said, not moving a muscle, was: "She must be a very charming woman to have produced such a son. Her picture is on his writing-table—a thin slip of a young creature with large, languid Italian eyes, the hair rolled up rather quaintly on her forehead. It was taken in Rome while he was at Oxford. The mother was away from him so much in those days—her health, perhaps—that the boy was thrown a great deal with his aunt, Lady Cassock, and the cousins Anie and Estelle. He showed me a queer little faded photograph of Anie and himself, he a young lad and she a child, with a wild mass of hair streaming down her back and such little, thin sticks of legs—just at the age when a girl-child's petticoats become, all of a sudden, quite impossibly short."

"Now that I have seen Ambry," went on Bina—"fancy if he had known that I knew him!—I shall

look upon poor little Anie with such different eyes. I confess, Quin, although you told her story so chivalrously, it was hard for me to get quite the right idea of a young girl who could so desperately cling where she was so obviously not wanted. It was rather horrible to me. Now that I have seen her Ambry at close quarters, I am beginning to understand a bit better. He is so astonishingly good-looking, and, of course, he was more respectful than when he stared at me in the street that night." Here Bina stopped and shot a glance at Pantá, from whom this small episode had been carefully concealed, but he was taking one of his restorative naps, languishing rather distortedly upon his treacherous leather cushions.

"That's perfectly safe," said Quin. "I told you, you will remember, that we caught our youth off his guard."

"Oh, he stared enough," put in Bina, "but he was so charming and deferential to Miss Johnstone-Ford, and he really did look so awfully well in some grey flannels——"

"O woman!" cried Quin, "we little know what benefactors our tailors can be! And, of course, our young man was intensely occupied in mutely telling someone how ravishingly pretty she was——"

Bina had the grace to blush.

"So you see, as I did," continued Quin, "that the full stream of such a personality as his is rather apt to take young things off their feet, and to drop them far beyond the reach of the ordinary ropes and safeguards of the shallows. But Varian, far stronger than Ambry, in the ultimate ways that count, has got her now, has

pulled her back to dry land, has pumped some pure air into her lungs, and he will see to it, doubtless, that it will be his hand to which she will cling when next she wets those dainty feet of hers in an emotional flood."

"I wonder," interjected Bina, much interested. "He is such a delightful boy, he will make her happy, while the other sister, your storm-cloud, keeps Ambry in order. Don't you think it very likely that he has thrown himself on the Johnstone-Fords to catch his breath a bit?"

"Doubtless," replied Quin. "A foolish move, for it will only make her savage, but I suppose he couldn't be expected to know that."

Quin rose from his rug.

"I must write a line or two to Varian, saying that you will look for them on Thursday."

"Write it here," said Bina, pulling out a jiggling little table drawer. "Here is everything to your hand. Then let us go out together for a whiff of air, and we can pop it into the box. Will you?"

"Rather!" replied Quin fervently, galvanized into a pleasurable glow of action by her tone, her look, and her suggestion.

The note was evidently composed and duly committed to the pillar-box, for it went up to Varian next morning, sitting in the toast-rack on his breakfast-tray, and was read and enclosed in a letter to Wimbledon.

The more he saw of our three friends, the more Varian liked them. It tickled a certain sense in him to talk to individuals so frankly unconventional in their attitude to the ordinary normal London life; who were unspoiled, unaffected, quite quietly indifferent to public

opinion as a thing that could not possibly count for the enlightened, and who somehow gave the impression of being unspotted from the casual mud of the highway, a liberal sprinkling of which the best of us are apt to carry about on our nether garments. You felt it was not from any particular virtue on their parts, but simply because they were travelling on a certain line that, lying parallel with our own rather shoddy, makeshift one, was yet on a different plane, where heads were steadier, brains clearer, and where the purity of the air kept the whole bodily and mental mechanism taut and fit. Such being the case, fortified by their unique position, Quin could drop down temporarily to our level in order to carry a sandwich-board, himself grotesquely travestied, simply as one way of studying our cosmopolitan life, cutting for himself a cross-section from the upper Piccadilly crust to the wriggling protoplasm of the slums. For the same reason, Bina could take money over the little counter, could sell her perishable merchandise, in its jars, its bowls, its panniers and its bags, all the time keeping the allure of a dainty Columbine, who, in gauzy, flower-wreathed skirts with beautiful, slender, trembling legs, had fluttered down from heaven knows where—running away from Pierrot, perhaps—into this little cosy nest of a shop.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FORTUNE cajoled Varian these days. Martini β was emerging from his mists, taking on a personality that was not wholly gummed together, after the German manner, from gobbets of the brave Simone, from snips and pinches of Ugolino or of Guido. He was beginning to articulate with a voice of his own, this poor Beta, who, until now, had choked in the depressing promiscuity of "*Scuola di—*" filled up as the fancy took the cataloguer.

But far more important than any such Frankensteinish dealings with an early Siennese, any such home manufacture of an Italian Primitive, was the success that had so far attended Anie's efforts to throw off the morbid hold that Ambry had unwittingly gained upon her imagination. The affair of the pellets had decidedly frightened her. She had interpreted aright the horrified message in Gita's eyes. She had seen the look on Varian's face, had felt the imperative grip of his hands to some purpose. Estelle's horrible letter gradually lost its Medusa look. Estelle was so clever, she could hold him if she made up her mind to. If he had thrown Anie aside like a limp little rag, he would find it a different matter to loosen her sister's firm, white fingers from around his. Perhaps he wouldn't even try. . . . Mamma would be fearfully vexed. Poor Anie could go through all the stock arguments by rote. The only glimmer would be his title, which wasn't much of a one, but everything helped. While the letter re-

mained unanswered, it seemed to send out tiny, restless flames every time she entered her room and looked at the writing-table. So she braced herself to the task, and soon after Ambry's headlong retirement to Ridges Street, sent Estelle a vague page and a half scrawl, saying that she hoped they would be happy, but that Estelle must know what a row mamma would make. Then, taking her courage in both hands, she wrote that she had once met Ambry Nunholme at the Lynes. Didn't Estelle remember? There was absolutely nothing, of course, for Estelle to remember, but our young lady ignored that. Heavens, what a relief it was to have that off her mind! She almost thought she could meet him now without making a tragic little fool of herself. She hurriedly sealed her letter and gave it to the maid to put in the post-bag. Going to the window, the girl leaned out, breathing deeply of the night air, dripping with garden scents, perfumed with honeysuckle. She felt herself to be mysteriously washed and purified, as clean and sweet as the good Catholic after his Confession.

This blissful state of affairs gave her thereafter the untroubled sleep of a healthy baby, and sent her downstairs of a morning with a step that beat a gay little tattoo upon the old curving stairs, with eyes on which the lids no longer weighed like white clouds, with lips curving upward into the unknown future, not downward into the too-familiar past.

Bee, meeting this changed young person in the hall, was duly elated both for the child's own sake and for Gita's, upon whom Anie's condition had had a depressing effect.

"No need to be banal these days and to ask you how you slept," said Bee, drawing the girl's arm through her own. "I am walking to the dairy. Will you come?"

The day was close and breathless. An apricot-coloured fog, broken and thin enough in places to be called a haze, had floated out with the dawn from their gigantic neighbour, that heaving, petrol-stifled London, prone in its vast bulk, blackened, tawdry, yet still magnificent. From the airless squares, from the livid courts, from the traffic-poisoned river, this feathery morning fog had escaped, only to be caught again, only to trail its tangled amber scarves among the trees and gardens of suburbia. The sun was not yet strong enough to suck up the shreds, and, meantime, the aspect of Nature was enhanced, to the sophisticated eye, by this odd fillip of the abnormal. What might not happen in this wonderful atmosphere, this golden morning twilight, when not a breath moved a leaf, when bees forgot to suck and birds to sing?

"How curious and rather nasty," remarked Bee, who loved the flat, easy road of every day.

Anie wished for the sympathetic Varian, which was a good sign.

When they had finished their business in the cool, milky, creamy dairy-house, Anie drew Bee, faintly protesting, toward the Bois and the lime alley, although it was damper there than ordinary, and their heels made tiny, imperfect, swollen crescents in the heavy turf. The circle of lawn, half enclosed in its thick wings of greenery, dripped with a crystal dew that hung tearfully on every other grass blade, and powdered with its

diamond dust those gossamer webs that rarely outlive the earliest morning hours. To-day the fog had set back the clock, and you had the exhilarating impression of having gained on poor old Father Time at last.

At the sides of this natural greenwood stage, where the wings of a real theatre would commence, enormous clumps of hollyhocks had been planted. This is what Anie had come to see. They made an incomparable decoration, the tall, budded spears shooting their irregular lengths from the serried centre, rearing themselves valiantly against the clipped background of dense shade. Their colours were that pure, cool, perfect lemon that always makes you thirsty to look at, and those freshest tones of pink that remind you of all charming things, from Alpine glow to a country child's flushed cheek. Just enough white, and deep, dahlia-like crimson had been chosen for accent and relief. The buds had burst, and the gardener's dream was in a fair way to be realized.

"How enchanting!" breathed Anie, as she tiptoed her way across the soaking grass, dragging up with difficulty her swaddling-clout of a skirt, tarnishing with beaded moisture the gay, silver buckles of her foolish little shoes. The rank stalks rose high above her head from this covert of thick fleshy leaves. The green about each giant bud gave the impression of having been pinched together by an amateur out of pale, woolly cloth, while the opened flowers themselves, especially the double ones, bore a disconcerting resemblance to pink and yellow paper. Anie stared at the horrid things, open-eyed and disgusted.

"Oh, what a sell! Don't come over," she cried to

Bee, who had just finished laboriously catching up a voluminous black skirt with large, sensible pins that she had been able to produce from some private hoard.

"What?" asked this lady vaguely, as she made a tentative sortie upon the water-logged lawn, moving her feet gingerly in their flat, black-strapped slippers of mid-Victorian cut. Anie waved her back.

"Don't try it. You'll hate them. They look as if the stage-carpenter had thrown them together after he had finished setting up the scenery. They are not flowers at all; they are brutes, and yet how beautiful they can be from here." She had regained dry land by Bee's side, and they gazed together at a decoration that, like so much else in life, has to be focused exactly in order to yield its secret.

"They will be just right for Varian on Saturday," remarked Anie, not quite realizing how he slid into every experience of hers, however fleeting, how his name had grown copartner with every stock and stone of the garden, with every book and bibelot of the house.

From the lower steps of the terrace they were amazed to see Gita calmly walking out of the drawing-room window—this Gita who ever played the Invisible Princess until the luncheon-gong sent her magical guardians scuttling to their dim, story-book corners, and set her free to emerge from her cool, tranquil, shady rooms in her long-trailing, vaguely-coloured garments—silent and gentle, always rather tired and aloof for the first few moments—free to kiss Anie, to smile at Bee, and to preside gracefully, if languidly, at their pleasant, informal meal. Conceive their amaze, therefore, at see-

ing her at eleven o'clock in the morning, with her drawing-board under her arm, her colour-box and pliable stool grasped awkwardly in her unaccustomed hands. They hailed her with glad shouts, possessing themselves of her belongings, and, begging to be told her wishes, stood laughingly at attention in front of her.

"It is the fog, of course," she explained. "Who could resist this enchanting light, even if one choke for it? I thought I might get something if I brought my things out." She looked about from the edge of the terrace. "Is the Bois too wet?"

"Yes, yes—much," cried Anie. "And the hollyhocks, though ducks, are much too obvious for your darling little fanciful sketches."

"Fancy is banished to-day, my dear. Science shall direct my pencil. Hence I suppose I may as well sit here as anywhere else. I want to make some studies of leaves and the way they hang from a branch. They are perfectly motionless in this divinely clotted air. See, it is as thick as yellow cream between those beech boughs. Thank you, Bee," as the latter unfolded the stool, pressing down its striped linen seat with an experienced hand. Anie set the colour-box close by upon the balustrade of the terrace, under the shadow of a stucco urn whose rounded, mellow sides showed long, irregular, greyish cracks.

"May I stay and watch?" she asked, as Bee melted away toward the house, housewifely cares not being lightly cast aside at eleven o'clock in the morning.

"Yes, do," murmured Gita rather absently, the pencil busy in those long, clever fingers. With con-

siderable address she attacked her forms, but with none of the painstaking care of the lady amateur. Her pains had been taken quite otherwise, long ago, the fruit of intense watchfulness, of close attention, and of mental concentration. You saw at once that every line was directed by intellectual effort, was the result of a personal formula, carefully built up and now applied to Nature in a fashion at once delicate and individual. Behind each outline you were aware of anatomical structure, each apparently careless, unrelated pencil scratch betrayed a deft foreknowledge of the ultimate pattern the formula would succeed in weaving, be it with a screen of beech foliage, or with a group of fallen chestnut leaves, brown and sun-scorched, their fragile, curled edges taking the movement of thin, beaten metal. All this economy of line, accompanied by the subtle intelligence made use of by people who draw as Gita does, has come to be considered "Japanese" in studio patter. It might with propriety be called the result of a certain philosophic habit of mind, not necessarily confined to any one country, but certainly more commonly found in the East where a knowledge of the essence that lurks behind every particular directs the hand of artisan and artist alike. In that well-known circular movement of brush or pencil, in that symbol of the shadowy, primordial egg, is held in solution all the most intricate of natural forms; you are given a line or two—it seems no more than that—on the thin, delicate, rice-paper, and, if your eye be not too incurably gross, you see the essential soul of a kingfisher, say—a hawk or a tortoise; or you grasp the inner magic of cherry-blossom petals, or you hear the Circe-

song of the grapelike clusters of wistaria. The seventeenth-century Dutchmen did something of this sort with their light. That light, which, sprayed on white-washed wall or boarded floor, on the quietest of interiors, on common fruit in a china dish, may be said to transfigure these homely objects into Platonic Ideas. All this cannot quite be claimed for our Madame Gita, but those apples on a bough—three of them, I think there were, with a few downy leaves—found among her sketches, now has its modest place in one of the great private collections of France.

However, no one was worrying her head about such transcendental matters this foggy morning in the moist, green garden, Gita least of all as she dabbed at her drawing-board, with an occasional smile over her shoulder to an Anie perched on the balustrade, dangling her feet.

"I don't suppose you ever felt like an Old Man of the Sea, did you, Gita?" asked this young person in a small voice, after some half-hour had gone by. A mumble, taken to be dissent, from the sketcher. "I have," continued the experience-worn youngster on the balustrade. "Ever since Estelle's letter came, I knew I must answer it before it would fall off my shoulders where it seemed to be bound, all hot and sticky. I couldn't tear it off, except on that condition. So I wrote late one night, and Page popped it in the post-bag. Varian pulled me out of a horrid mess, Gita, that perhaps you don't know anything about. Please don't turn around. I can tell you so much better when you are not looking at me. There was someone I met in the country, at the Lynes. Of course, they are your

old friends, as well as mamma's. I lost my head—we both lost them for a week or two. That was as long as he could care, I suppose. We are so unlike, I bored him and made him savage, but I couldn't see it until Varian opened my eyes. Then I came down here and you took me in like an angel. To know you and to love you, Gita, has given me something no one will ever be able to take away from me. I am your girl much more than mamma's. When you looked at me the other morning—you know—you burned up the wish ever to touch one of the horrid things again. Varian frightened me, but you saved me."

Gita leaned over with a hand on the girl's knee.

"You blessed infant," she said.

"So I wrote to Estelle," went on Anie, "telling her that I had met Ambry at the Lynes. I never told mamma. They never knew. Now Estelle is mad about him—and he has never said a word. She means to marry him. I thought I would have died when I read it, but, actually, now, this very morning, safe with you, I don't seem to care. I am humbled, I am ashamed, I shall shiver when I meet him, but—it has all shifted like a scene in a play, and you and Varian are my centre, not Ambry any more."

"Thank heaven, little Anie!" Here Gita let her sketch slide on a sudden impulse to take the girl in her arms. As she pressed the warm, ruffled head to her breast, she had the delicious, trembling sensation that she held Varian there—Varian, her baby, once more.

It was a moment that neither of them was ever likely to forget. Gita knew now that she had got

Varian's wife in her arms, in the shape of this soft pleading young thing, and she kissed her with this rather solemn knowledge. Anie, on the mother's breast, feeling the secret presence of the son, drew herself away shyly, with a caress as light as one of the curled leaves on the drawing-block. How good life seemed, how fair the fog-wrapped day, how infinitely that of Romance the tender, green, mysterious garden! The girl looked far off into the smoky sky with the dazzled, inward-gazing eyes of the mystic, but she was in reality only a little pagan whose white skin under the heart had just begun to show the minute, characteristic red wound made by nothing under the sun save a certain god's tiny, feathered barb.

They were idling over tea that afternoon near the lime tunnel when Varian's letter, enclosing Quin's note, was brought out. Gita tore it open eagerly, for it was an unexpected supplement to his unfailingly regular morning budget. Quin's communication pleased her immensely.

"I like his hand, don't you?" she asked, as she passes it over the teapot to Anie. "He expresses himself charmingly, too. The man must be most unusual. In fact all three are—the book-collecting aged father, the philosophic sandwichman, and the Della Robbia dairymaid. I shall look forward to Thursday and our entertainment in that glorified 'room-back-of-the-shop,' where very good talk seems to go forward, according to our boy. Perhaps they might enjoy running down here for one of these long, light evenings, when the day's work is done. Varian could bring them with him and take them back in the car."

Anie looked up from Quin's note that she had been twisting in her fingers.

"It would be jolly," she said. "We could sit in front of the Bois, on our grassy stage, and imagine we were a platonic academy, or strayed Florentines out of Boccaccio, whichever way the conversation seemed to draw us."

"Tamed and fumigated by the centuries, I hope, in the latter case," smiled Gita. "Yes, that is a delightful thought. We might arrange a little fête—perhaps the pretty young woman sings or dances. No, it is this Mr. Quin who does that, quite astonishingly, I understand. We may succeed in warming ourselves up to something of the kind, if all goes well. But you are as sober as the woolsack, little Anie." Gita leaned over and took her hand. "Is something troubling you, my dear?"

"Oh, no, no," cried the girl. "I am only by way of being more of a silly goose than usual. This note, you know," holding up poor Quin's simple effort, "gives me the oddest impression of having once come in contact with the person who wrote it, or rather he with me, for I cannot place him at all, and yet I have the feeling that he knows me quite well. It is rather creepy, isn't it? and perfectly absurd, of course. Please put it back in Varian's envelope again, and then I shall forget that it tried to say something to me."

"Talk to Varian about it when you see him," suggests Gita. "He is interested in all such subconscious manifestations. A tiny pebble falls into our depths, and it is as though the resulting ripple spread and spread, gathering volume as it rises straight up into

our everyday life, so that we say to ourselves, as you did just now—‘ah, something has happened *là-bas*,’ but we may never know the inner meaning of the stone-throwing.”

“I think I may know something when I see him,” replies Anie.

“Then Thursday is settled. Varian says he will lunch with us and act as our pilot to Countess Street. I shall be rather pleased to have the experience. Ah, here comes Bee with those wonderful peaches. If you will move the teapot, Anie, there will be just room for the bowl.”

There was equally lively anticipation in the little shop. On the fateful Thursday morning Panta wisely decided to take a nap directly after luncheon in order not to sink into the insidious, involuntary embraces of one after tea. To that end he forebore a bookish ramble, getting in a small one, however, simply because he couldn’t help it, along Buckingham Palace Road where there are but few pickings of the kind he loves.

The room was cool and fresh and dim, the thin curtains gently moving in the afternoon breeze, as Panta descended the little stair, the first of the party to be ready. He let himself down on his leather throne, a pleasing vision of an ancient man, in his grey coat and trousers of some strange, far-off cut, to be sure; with his broad, white collar with pointed corners turned down over a black stock whose ends are laboriously interlaced in an approach to a bow; with his thin, straight old feet in snowy stockings that *will* wrinkle around the ankle, *à la mousquetaire*, with soft slippers carefully blacked at the toe where they are apt to be a little

stubby, you know. The long-fingered, veined old hands were busy, with that polite, simulated air of business that we all know how to assume when we have some twenty minutes to get through in a gentlemanly manner before something nice is going to happen—before the guests arrive, before the car snorts gayly at the door, before the water boils over in joyous anticipation. In this delusive manner were Panta's hands busy—busy with who but his ancient gossip, that "Immortal Gymnast" ?

Quin, in his character of strong man, had, earlier in the day, brought down the required chairs, even to Bina's bedroom one that certainly does bear a mystic resemblance to a *prie-dieu*, with its low, sober-coloured seat, its long, curved back that ends in a sudden roll-over like a breaking wooden wave, that might form a very good rest for a pair of folded, praying hands and a sleek prayer-book, but when Bina choses to sit here, with the mop of her gold-shot curls flinging their tendrils over the slippery ledge, folded hands and prayer-books are the very last things you are apt to think of.

She had selected small, white, innocent-looking flowers for the bowls on the little tables, with a branch or two of pale-blue Canterbury bells to rise out of them like campaniles. All the delicate tea-furniture so simply set forth, the fair china, the curious silver, were of a kind not often met with outside of proud collections. They were mostly early eighteenth-century, and Bina had always known how to use them. Just now she was in the shop with a tray, hovering over the cream jars, the golden butter pats, and the ripest strawberries in their woven, brown-green, lined nests. Rug-Pug, in a

flutter, but with a sternly steady knife, had cut a heap of waferlike bread shavings—one could call them nothing else, but 'twas the fancy of the moment. Bina would presently transform them into minute, three-cornered, cocked-hat or diamond-shaped sandwiches, as the spirit moved her. Then she would run upstairs, to run down again presently in a little frock of mull, deliciously yellowish in tone, that doesn't follow the fashionable line simply because you realize that it is much too elegantly fine for any mode but its own. It was cut away to show her pretty, full throat, and to give you the benefit of the enchanting way her hair grows up from the back of her neck. Her skin has that amberish, sun-warmed look that is much more beautiful than the traditional, rather overdone milkiness. Wherever buttons appear on the gown, they carry each a deceptive little black velvet loop that pretends to be a buttonhole, and isn't. With a rose in her breast she is the freshest little hostess in London.

Quin tells her so, when he looks in for a moment on the way to the Gymnasium, solemnly swearing to be back on the tick of four-thirty. As he has rather a developed time sense, she, contrary to all precedent, believes him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

VARIAN, full of interest for the success of his venture, took his women to Countess Street in due season. Anie peered under the shop awning, all eyes for the fragrant altar of the Bona Dea of which she had heard so much. In a thin, powder-blue gown, with a close little upstanding frill of black net about her throat, with a shady tulle hat drooping over her eyes, and with her long-handled parasol, she looked a slim child, trying with engaging solemnity to be a grown woman.

“Poor, dear, little thing!” thought Bina involuntarily, as she went forward to meet them. “What a baby to be paddling in London waters! No wonder Ambry made one mouthful of her.”

As she took the girl’s hand, who knows what strong, steady throb of the cloud-current passed from her into those childish fingers, up that delicate arm, into that tired, half-frightened, perplexed young brain, carrying with it the bright flag of courage, the gayety born of healthy nerves, the frank, free pulse of full-blooded life? The girl dimly felt that something odd was happening to her, and that she liked it. She smiled into Bina’s eyes and squeezed the kind hand. She was suddenly aware that she was going to enjoy her tea enormously, and she looked around for Varian, turning to that young man, in imagination or in reality, at

every wave of pleasure or pain that assaulted her small, drifting soul. He was standing quietly back of her, as it happened, and took her in tow while Bina, all soft courtesy, charmed by Gita Edmonton's quiet phrases, by the languid yet authoritative atmosphere which enveloped her, led her guests into the familiar brown room where Panta, very dignified and formal, with an agreeable, old-fashioned precision, awaited them, much more erect than usual, upon the hearthrug. After the unavoidable naming of names, the customary murmur of friendly imbecilities, the inevitable rustle and small confusion of getting yourself seated where you think your hostess would like you to be, everyone was prepared to be gay, simple, and happy, to talk all at once, to be argumentative, to be inconsequent, to laugh a great deal at innocent jokes, and to display a primitive appetite for tea. Such was the pleasing influence of this quiet back room, rather brown and worn and smoky and shabby, but rifted with the invisible gold of the cloud-currents ever subtly stirring through it.

When the company were seated, Bina discovered with an inward smile that Panta had secured his arm-chair, fearing, perhaps, for a lady's peace of mind on his treacherous cushions; Varian had drawn up the *prie-dieu*, of all things, within easy distance of his old friend; Mrs. Edmonton, with the habitual instinct of the true recliner, was gracefully bent into the curve of the ancient sofa, and little Anie had appropriated the lyre-backed chair close to the pretty tea-table where she could watch Bina busy with the spirit-lamp, where she could admire the darling china, and could hide her

foolish little nose in a provokingly commodious Canterbury bell.

Bina glanced at the clock, swelling with virtuous indignation. "No Quin!" Ah, but it still lacked one minute of the appointed half-hour. Bina appeared to be accurately measuring tea, answering at the same time a laughing question of Anie's; Panta's voice was running on in a happy monologue on the arts and artfulness of the second-hand book people, followed with amused interest by Varian and his mother, when the old clock emitted one wheezy, petulant stroke, just as Quin, with that light, firm, even step of his, appeared in the doorway. Bina smiled and gave herself a reproachful shake. Gita Edmonton, from her sofa nook, took in at a glance the dark face, with the deep yet alert eyes, the well-set shoulders, the long arms, the tall figure, intensely supple as the man moved. He was extraordinarily magnetic. She was at least aware of that as he crossed the room, presentations being over, and took his seat on the end of her sofa. Why didn't he start practice as one of those new-fangled nerve-doctors, of whom you are always dimly suspicious, but to whom half your friends rush, and to whom one fine morning you find yourself rushing, too, to be supported, to be braced, to be bullied by a vivid male personality, by the steady look in a deep, kind eye, by the grasp of just such a fine, sensitive hand as this? Gita had warmed to this odd friend of Varian's. She liked the way her boy had greeted him—the little touch of familiarity, the hand on the shoulder. With that keen, dark face, with that figure, in that admirably cut blue serge, he might very well be anything—an attaché

of one of the foreign embassies, say. A sandwichman, indeed! The thing verged on the absurd.

She turned to him with her gentle, womanly smile that to a certain extent belied her, and prepared to find out, with guileless, Gitaesque guile, what he was made of.

Meanwhile, Anie was in a fine tumult. If Quin's note, at second-hand, had fluttered her with a sense of its mysterious antecedents, what could not be said of the effect of the man's own presence? The little soul that Quin had once held in the hollow of his hand, the young body for one instant half in his arms, giving up its pitiful secrets, unconsciously unfolding under the soft breath of the cloud-current,—this soul and this body, here in the room back of the shop, acknowledged by vague, struggling symptoms that Anie herself was unable to interpret the presence of their dominator. But all this soon passed off, for the cloud-current was rigidly excluded from this tea-party, and Anie's subconscious disquiet ceasing to trouble her after Quin had bent over her with her cup of tea, advising her to omit cream if she cared for a real Indian flavour, she was able to telegraph to Varian by an expressive glance that she thought his Mr. Quin most awfully jolly.

Submerged in the suave, mellow odour of that mysterious, golden brew, replete with marvellously melting cocked-hat sandwiches, sustained by little mounds of reddest strawberries dipped in smooth, thick cream, our hosts and their guests had finally reached that pleasant, stretching, purring stage of comradeship,—the really perfect moment of human intercourse. When Varian and Quin had lighted up their cigarettes, the time was ripe for conversation.

Bina, who seemed to have fascinated Anie, a fact that did not escape Quin's amused, indulgent observation, had drawn that young lady nearer the china cupboard, and they were presently fingering cups and platters, quaint teapots, and a whole flock of little jugs, with such gestures, with such pursing of the lips, as are well known to be common to your deep-dyed connoisseur.

Gita turned to Quin.

"Varian tells me you have had some talks in his rooms. Has he confided to you the secret of Martini β ? As a mother, let me tell you—" here Gita shot a glance at her boy,—“I am simply swollen with pride and joy, but, as a weak, feminine imitation of a critic, I have my misgivings.”

Quin laughed. “I know so well what you mean—this straining of the attention after the hypercritical, after the supersubtle. The old gods are grown too familiar for the restless mind of youth. Their names and their works are too overlaid with commentary, the great ones being now no more than a palimpsest,—Johann the German, Jacques the Frenchman, Giuseppe the Italian, having scratched and rewritten, scratched and rewritten, all over the poor great dead, so that one wonders whither has flown their once so deeply-felt charm. Then the young ones come down the oft-travelled road, gay and debonair. ‘Who was the real genius? Ah, we shall show you!’ So they dig and delve and unearth some poor worthy soul of a Primitive, a good enough journeyman in his day, perhaps, but no great thing, you may be sure. Because he's fresh, because no one has ever heard of him before, the

monographs fly like a shower of confetti, amid the tranced ecstasies of the coteries. But your son, Mrs. Edmonton, really seems to be on the trail of something genuine. The scent is clear, and he will make a good run to the finish. Whether many things he claims for his Beta might not—might, you see we say—without too much stretching, belong to stout old Simone himself is, I confess, a distinct question, to my mind. But there are others of which one cannot be so sure. That odd mark of the square heel is certainly an acute enough stroke. He tells me that Fortescue is pleased with what he has done, and that the proofs will soon be coming in. It is amazingly interesting work—this artistic excavation of a personality—and no wonder one feels a godlike exhilaration at times.”

Gita had been watching Quin’s expressive face and hands as he talked, and his line of thought marching with her own, she began to think him extremely intelligent, as is an amiable failing of most of us. So she followed this lead with as much animation as she ever showed. Varian, looking over at his mother, smiled to see her so interested. Whenever she spoke, as she was doing now, deliberately but without her bored drawl, whenever she fixed her companion with those languid dark eyes instead of promenading them vaguely over the ceiling and the cornice, her acute son knew that her attention had been caught and rejoiced accordingly.

“You mentioned Fortescue,” continued Gita. “Do you know him or his things?”

Quin disavowed any but the most fleeting knowledge of either. “Your son had a new book of his on his

table," he said. "I confess to turning it over for a look at the pictures like any schoolboy."

"That is his much-heralded work on Greco. Varian brought it down to me. According to him, in their little critical world, everyone has been quite overcome by it. It is doubtless very penetrating and subtle, with a great deal of cleverly-managed insistence on a certain peculiar subjective bent of Greco's that perhaps did, but more likely did not, exist. Surely you have noticed, Mr. Quin, how increasingly difficult it is to be simple, to be satisfied with the good, clear light of common day? I dare say, having set people waggling with this little squib of his, Rossiter Fortescue fancies he sees long cracks commencing to invade that splendid high finish of Velasquez's fame."

"To be the sponsor of a new little god has, no doubt, its intoxicating side," mused Quin. "But weren't we always taught that Greco was a madman? In that case, there's his morbid psychology ready to your hand. Do we need a Mr. Fortescue to put us in our places?"

Gita nodded approval. "This young school is nothing if not dogmatic. They convince, with the formidable end of a bludgeon sticking out of their pocket. We are such sheep, we follow into their enticing pen for fear of falling among the goats if we stay outside. But I do want Varian to be sane. To a partial mother, he seems to have command of a small vein of critical insight, restricted, perhaps, but true. This he must keep objective; clear, not muddy—no personal *parti-pris*, no subjective hobby to ride, like this coruscating Rossiter."

Varian caught the name.

"Still harping on my Greco?" he laughingly inquired. "Mothers have their blind side. She refuses Rossiter his meed of praise. I tremble when I think of the reception she is preparing for my poor Beta, shivering, as he will be, in the nakedness of the fire-new Primitive."

"I'll give him a winding-sheet," said Gita transparently ferocious.

"Rather!" put in her son with immense conviction.

Varian turned to Panta, who had been admiring Mrs. Edmonton's slight, frail figure, her pale, clear skin and tender eyes. How many such delicate, high-bred faces of just that type had he not seen in Italy in the old days—those fair, patrician women, their soft necks and brows glowing golden in the light of the knots of candles set under each painted wooden box? In the theatre at Padua he remembered that there were sliding shutters. You pulled them, and so cut off the view of the stage. You wore a mask then, you pretty lady, with powder in your hair, and silver-laced brocade.

Panta, much to his confusion, was forced to ask Varian to repeat his question. He was ashamed, but Gita's Italian eyes were the cause of this inattention. He rarely slipped back now into the past. It made him too sad and dreamy, Bina said.

It appeared that Varian had asked him to show his mother the famous "Immortal Gymnast," merely as a delightful piece of old binding, ladies not being supposed to be interested in metaphysics. Panta hastened to obey, amusing Gita by the way he plunged a long, nervous hand into the hidden intricacies of his wonderful chair that combined the advantages of an inn for a

tird body and a refuge for an harassed tome. He fished it out, dusted its sides with a large, neat handkerchief, and blew gently along its edges before handing it to the lady. Gita duly admired its venerable person, sniffed daintily its bookish aroma, that scent, potent in charm to the elect, that is exuded like some precious gum by yellow, century-old paper, by worn, worked leather from which the gilding has fallen in flakes and blotches.

"I once read Winckelmann," murmured Gita, in order to give herself a countenance before this severe gymnast, lying quiet for once and grimly potential in her lap. "He was really much more alarming at first sight than he became on a more intimate acquaintance."

"Yes, yes," nodded Panta. "The gymnast speaks of that German fellow in some reference or other to the fine arts at the very back of the book. I've read him quite through now, and am beginning all over again."

He gazed mildly at Gita, who said: "Philosophizing about art seems to me to be an exercise of small benefit either to philosopher or to artist, for the former, as a rule, never even touches the hem of the nethermost garment of the great goddess, and the latter, cradled in her lap, with his head on her bosom, is blissfully unconscious that there is anything wonderful in this good, kind, familiar, nursing-mother to chatter about at all. Both, perhaps, may misunderstand art, but both, most assuredly, misunderstood each other."

"I never thought of it in just that way," remarked Panta quite aghast. Gita's eyes and voice were hypnotic.

Varian laughed. "She's trying to draw us, Mr. Panta. Don't be taken in. My mother is a delicious and—forgive me, dearest, if I give you away—transcendental humbug. When you come to Wimbledon, I'll show you her drawings, and then perhaps you'll understand."

Here Bina at the cupboard looked over her shoulder, amused at the eagerness of their discussion, a platter aloft in her hands, her upraised arms emphasizing the graces of her pretty shape. Varian, taking the gymnast out of his mother's lap, joined Bina and Anie. The latter turned, to find the strangely disquieting but very good-looking Mr. Quin on his feet behind her chair. She twisted her little neck, caught like a tender white bird in a frill of net, looked up at him with her large eyes, but could think of nothing to say.

"Poor child, she's afraid of me, without knowing why," thought Quin, remembering vividly the helpless feelings of her small hands on his breast, as she had clutched at him to save herself.

He drew up the despised stool near the lyre-backed chair, and presently had the little lady at her ease, with some diverting tales of his youthful dancing cohorts, the infant products of a Soho slum, toeing it energetically, with a certain desperate lightness, their precociously worldly eyes already fixed upon "the halls."

"Are some of them pretty?" asked Anie, the inevitable question of her sex.

"Perhaps not now, but a few have what you might call prospects, when decent food and light and air shall have cleaned up their smug little faces. Their wits are

sharp enough now, and here and there you catch a look through a mop of red hair, a turn of the head, a still angular undulation that distinctly hints at a personality of the kind the opulent manager, that swollen Czar of their curious world, is ever on the look out for. Poor little monkeys! The question is: what would they do if they didn't do this?"

"But I think it is a charming profession," put in Anie eagerly. "It has always fascinated me, so that I sit on the edge of my chair, much to mamma's disgust, whenever there is a ballet at the opera. To see a swarm of them in their tulle skirts float down on their toes, trembling like white leaves that the music is shaking, always sends a delicious shiver up my spine."

"Ah, you see it from 'the front,'" replied Quin. "You see them through the æsthetic veil we are always pulling and pinning around them. But they drop the grand manner in the wings more often than not, and become the hard-bitten little cockneys with highly-developed muscles, and no artistic intelligence to speak of. The vogue for eccentric dancing that is now coming in will perhaps be their salvation. It will spur them on to use what brains they have, to work, to invent, to originate, not merely to execute mechanically what we hammer into them. Some bizarre idea of that little red-head I spoke of, a few outrageous steps, the mad Polish music to match, and you will have the sensation of the hour. That is the Dream in their Business, that is what they are all striving for. It may not be art, but it keeps them at it. It makes possible that heart-breaking toe-exercise, the long hours on scanty

food, the dirt, the crowding, the jealousy, and the back-ache."

Here Quin realized that he might be drawing a picture somewhat too realistic for these sweet, sheltered eyes, but before he could drag up another topic more suited to the spirit of the hour, Anie herself had commenced to tell him of the Bois in the garden at Wimbledon, the green semicircle of turf, the great clusters of hollyhocks on either side where lamps might be hung.

"I have seen just such garden theatres in Italy," said Quin, taking up the tale, "but there you have the tragic, daggerlike cypress for accent instead of our own mild, pink and yellow posies. At a villa near Sienna there is such a one where nobody has danced or sung or laughed since the eighteenth century flickered in its ashes; but what an incomparable setting, when the moon and the nightingales are tearing your heart out between them!"

Bina, behind with Varian, caught this dramatic, rather highly-coloured statement, and wondered, with an internal smile, whatever Quin could be at. He himself, somewhat amused at the vigour his conversation seemed to draw from a *jeune fille* atmosphere that has been known to paralyse far better men than he, threw himself on Bina's mercy, and she did not fail him. Under her gentle guidance, the talk became general, and instantly gained in banality what it lost in piquancy.

Bina's few moments with Varian had sufficed for the turning inside out of that young man in the interests of feminine curiosity, a process of which, it need not be said, he remained profoundly ignorant. But it put naughty Bina in a fine flutter of pleasing sentiment.

"He is simply mad about the little Anie. Now that he is in the same room with her, I can feel the vibrations so plainly. He will never get over it, and when he has her, he'll hold her very tight indeed—little, slippery, wheedling thing that she is! And Quin talking to her about nightingales and the moon! It's in the very air."

"Isn't it growing quite late, Varian?" asked Gita, when another half-hour had passed, pausing in the midst of a question to Panta as to what he thought of the relative charm of Goldoni and Gozzi. "These long twilights are as deceptive as they are delicious."

"H'm," murmured Varian, quite happy between Anie and Bina. "It is perhaps time that we relieve these kind people of our somewhat limpetlike society, but I confess I hate to move. I am charmingly gorged in more senses than one. I am so intoxicatingly inert that a child could kidnap me and bear me away in his own little pram."

"Now you see my grave baby in his true colours, Mr. Quin," cried Gita. "Pretending to write books indeed!" Then, turning to Bina, "I am afraid we must be going, dear Miss Panta. You and your father and Mr. Quin have given us a very happy hour."

"Two would be considerably nearer the mark," whispered Varian to Anie's neck in the direction of her right ear.

"Will you come down to us for a long evening soon?" went on Gita. "Varian will bring you. Presently there will be a moon. We have a garden that boasts of its roses. Anie will sing to us, and we may all feel inspired to dance. It will give us great pleasure. Will you?"

Gita was not accustomed to be resisted, and her companions fell before her as usual, saying in their prettiest manner that they would be charmed. Everyone felt quite pleasantly warmed and smoothly stroked. Their personalities had met without jarring, their minds had struck out the proper mutual sparks.

Mrs. Edmonton stayed for a moment before the mirror to pat her hair and to wind her motor-scarf, while Anie and Bina and Quin dawdled into the shop where a confused Rug-Pug curtsied behind the miniature counter. Varian and Panta at the back window were busy over some book or other.

"Varian dear," presently called Gita's voice from the shop, where she had joined the others.

"One moment, darling," mumbled her son with his forehead against the window-pane

Bina was telling Mrs. Edmonton where the Wimbledon milk was sent.

"A shelter has been started for poor women and their babies, and the back garden is full of haggard pussies who wail and moan most oppressively. Would it interest you to see it some time? It is under the eye of a Miss Johnstone-Ford whose brother is the Secretary of the Neighbourhood House. They are from Oxford——"

"Why, of course," cried Gita. "He was Varian's tutor. A very clever person with singular ideas that, as a rule, find no roots in the ordinary professional pasture. So that blessed milk has brought us into touch again."

Meanwhile Anie, very slim and straight, is standing between the door and the low, pot-bellied window, ad-

miring, under Quin's guidance, the colour-scheme made up of yellows and whites and creams, of green and blue and brown. It is the palette of the simple life when you come to think of it—of all cool, innocent, growing things, of the blue sky, bending over the green woodland, of primroses, of crusty bread, of the wooden bowl of warm milk, of the eggs broken for the smoking omelette. Ah, well, you have had your day in the country, tramping between the hedgerows, but how many of you must come back at nightfall to that tired, livid old witch-wife, London, waking up only when twilight lets down her sooty veil, rubbing her hollow eyes that will presently sparkle with reddish gleams as darkness comes on, as the light springs from lamp to lamp along Piccadilly, as the life in food and wine begins to stir through worn-out arteries?

Poor Quin returned from this little, silent, imaginative excursion with a sudden, sharp, inexplicable consciousness that he must get Anie away from the door. Was his dreamy Della Robbia fantasy to be confronted with the hot unrest of Post-Impressionism? To put the thing plainly, Ambry was coming down Countess Street, that conquering step of his bearing him nearer and nearer to the shop, the which Quin had instantly perceived out of the tail of his eye. But the whole thing developed so quickly that before he could change his position, before he could get between his young companion and the door, the light was darkened by that tall, well-known figure, by that high head, and Ambry, more dashed than the little lady (for such is the queer nature of womankind when it comes to the scratch), found himself, to his panic horror, to be gaz-

ing straight into the large, frightened eyes of the elder Miss Cassock. The little thing, half choked at the heart, stood her ground bravely enough, although the knob of her wandlike parasol shook in her hand. Quin, without a word, stepped deliberately in front of her. Bina, grasping the situation with one startled glance, came forward with an engaging smile to take Ambry off Quin's hands. She had sufficient intuition to realize that these two would be better apart. She had not forgotten how Quin's arm had felt when she had laid her fingers on it after their little evening encounter with Ambry then so insolently on his own heath in Wilton Place.

Ambry's eyes were blazing, but he smiled at her as she came toward him in her pretty, pale mull frock. Anie had disappeared, he noticed. Good Lord, what a mess! How was he to know they would be so thick here, of all places? He supposed the slim, veiled woman in the background was Varian's mother. The dark chap had better talk to her, and let him alone. He didn't like his manner. When he had idled in here, it was with the half-acknowledged hope of finding the Watteau dairymaid alone and perhaps not disinclined for conversation. She was a fascinating little piece, and what was a fellow to do with not a word out of that devil Estelle? Gertrude was a dear, but old enough to be your mother, and so implacably good. This little thing in the shop looked so soft and kind, with a spark in her, too, by Jove. It was a damnable business to be caught in, and the thing now was to get himself out as easily and as quickly as possible.

All this flashed through his mind as he took Bina in

deliberately from head to foot. He'd have that much, at least.

"I'm most awfully sorry I've disturbed you, Miss Panta. I had no idea I was interrupting——"

"One can never interrupt in a shop," put in Bina sweetly. "Did you come in to buy something?"

Ambry was recklessly on the point of telling her what he had come in for, but a certain cool self-possession in her whole dainty person restrained him. She was maddeningly waiting for him to go on.

He thought desperately of the babies and the cats, but he knew that they had their daily supply which it would be asinine to augment. He swore to himself that he wouldn't go out of that shop carrying anything in a paper bag, so the only refuge was that of mild insanity.

"No, I didn't come in to buy anything," he said with decision.

"He looks as if he'd like to shake me," thought Bina, "and when his eyes have that odd glare in them he is certainly very striking, but just the least bit alarming." Before she had finished saying this to herself, the magnificent subject of her commentary had bowed to her, abruptly clapped his hat upon his head, and left the shop.

She wheeled around on Mrs. Edmonton and Quin, with the gesture of one saying, "There you have your Ambry. Take him or leave him!"

"Who is he?" inquired Gita—"that very beautiful but angry young man."

"He was at Oxford with your son. He is Sir Ambry Nunholme, who, for reasons best known to himself,

seems to be on a mysterious visit to our humble neighbourhood, incog. as Mr. Holmes."

"Good heavens!" cried Gita. "Not Ambry Nunholme! Did Anie see him? She was here with us, wasn't she?"

"We were at the window together," answered Quin. "She was behind me. Fancied it was a customer, I imagine, and vanished delicately into the background. Will you go to her, Bina, while I help Mrs. Edmonton into her cloak?"

Quin swept up the billowy garment from an adjacent chair, while outside the motor scuffled and screamed like a beaten child under the skilful ministrations of the invaluable Peters.

Two minutes before Varian had ascended into heaven, and the manner of it was this.

It seems that Panta had bustled upstairs to dig out his copy of Goldoni's "Memoirs" to show Varian an amusing passage that his talk with Mrs. Edmonton had recalled. The boy was alone in the twilight room, his forehead still against the window-pane, but his mind was elsewhere. Before his imaginative, inner sight, the Italian landscape lay swimming in the burning sun, the ivy stirred in the hot, dry breeze, the heavy, delicious odour of orange flowers and jasmine assaulted his somnolent sense. London and the room-back-of-the-shop had lost him for the moment, held only his agreeable, well-groomed exterior, while the better part of him was swinging to an eighteenth-century air, a trifle thin and faded, but with a cracked sweetness all its own.

He was, however, hurled back to Middlesex, exquisitely dizzy, to feel Anie's body under his hands, her fingers

trying to clutch him about the waist, so that she might press herself against him, crushing her proud little ruff, her white cheek on his breast. Was he quite mad? What had happened? But why ask? He had his life in his arms at last, and he held her head to him and kissed her as he had always meant to some day. It was a delirious finish to their simple tea-party. What wild impulse had pitched her shaking into his arms was something to inquire into later—oh, much later. It was enough, at present, to hold her there where she belonged, trembling himself, to be sure, almost as much as she did. Good heavens, what sweetness! Those big, wet eyes, those pale, soft cheeks. . . .

“O Varian,” the poor child almost whimpered. “Do keep me if you want me. Do you?”

Why ask? Why answer? Only a tightening of those safe arms.

“When I saw Ambry in front of me, I thought of nothing but to run to you. I have a horror of him. He is hateful to me. How he glared at me!”

“Good Lord, Anie, have we both gone off our heads?” cried Varian, holding her away from him in order to think. “What on earth is this about Ambry?”

“My dear, he is in the shop now,” whispered Anie, looked darkly in that direction, “or he was a moment ago. He pounced in suddenly and we glared at each other like two cats. That kind Mr. Quin stepped in front of me, and I fled in here. I suppose Gita would have helped me, but I forgot her. I forgot that there was anyone else in the world but you. O Varian!”

“Well, we’ve settled things now, my child,” said that radiant young man. “You belong to me for ever,

as of course you have from the beginning, only you didn't know it as I did. The moment I met these delightful souls, the moment I stepped into this good brown room, I had the extraordinary feeling that something rather tremendous would come of it, and—you see!"

He took her hand to kiss it. This was the moment ordained for the re-entrance of Panta from the stairway, with his ancient Maestro Goldoni, and of Bina, wide-eyed and a bit nervous, from the shop. The latter took in the situation with the machinelike intuition of her sex. So the little thing had found her proper mate at last. No more bruising of the wings in the cruel clutch of predatory hawks; no more dipping, and sidling, and sulking.

Anie flew to Bina, one pink blush.

"Is Gita waiting for me? Has that horrid person gone?"

"Yes, yes," replied Bina, patting the girl's hand, smiling her affectionate woman's knowledge into the wide, happy eyes. "The car is crying for you, weeping blue fumes into the gutter, more's the pity."

"Anie dear, bring Varian. It is desperately late," fluted Gita's voice from the doorway.

Varian, dizzy with joy, was pretending to read Goldoni, but the old, thick type danced drunkenly under his hot eyes. He never knew how he made his adieux and got himself and his nearest and dearest into the car. What a rattling good chap Quin was! There was congratulatory knowledge in that fine, final grip of his. Ah, how the song of the earth, the power and the beauty of it, sang in his ears all the way to Wimbledon!

And his little love sat so still, never a word out of her, holding fast to Gita's kind hand.

"What on earth do you suppose Ambry came for, Quin?" asked Bina, an hour later, her face lifted to his, as they sat together on the sofa in the last flicker of the twilight amidst the happy ruins of their successful little fête. Panta was dozing quietly with Goldoni sitting on his waistcoat; Rug-Pug had flitted away, carrying the remains of the cocked-hat sandwiches in a paper bag, and these two were alone, alone and together as if they had been holding hands on the white, deserted strand of some palm-set coral isle, lost in the far Pacific.

"You," replied Quin unemotionally.

"You?" echoed Bina foolishly.

"You, you, you," cried Quin, mocking her. "You asked what Ambry came for. That young man is lonely. Gertrude Johnstone-Ford is too strenuous a tonic for him not to crave a 'let-down,' and the pretty little thing in Countess Street struck him as too good to be resisted. Behold him, my child, in all his glory, savagely furious at finding you otherwise and so staggeringly (for him) engaged. He did us all a neat turn, however, for, by a healthy reaction, he throws our little Anie straight at the good Varian who will know how to hold her gently but firmly, and so cooks Ambry's goose in that direction. Not that he cares in the least. Estelle, a shrewd young piece, I gather, has been clever enough to irritate his every sense, so that at this moment he really doesn't know whether he most desires to kiss her or to wring her neck. I received a broken, confused, hurrying impression of anger, of impatience, al-

most of pain. He has his good points, this triumphing youth, and they show clearest in his least triumphant moments. He is a spoiled boy who may surprise us all some day, if the right woman manages him. I rather think Estelle may take on that billet. She is as proud and as obstinate as he, but with an incomparably sturdier will. She will pay him off to the last drop for this Ridges Street escapade, and then she'll open those long, strong, white arms of hers and take him in. I must stroll down to Ridges Street some day, and register its particular gamut. How the pampered Ambry stands it after Wilton Place is a mystery. Of course he sucks the sustaining juices of his pigheadedness, and Estelle's prematurely proprietary airs evidently frightened him not a little."

So they sat on in the silvery, mysterious dark, the evening air in the shadowy curtains, the distant torrent of the encompassing streets breaking, far away, on their island shore. The humming in their ears, the quick, full throb of healthy pulses, the languor that holds them to their seat one moment, the flashes of vigour that, the next, would send the old walls spinning, would carry them out into the wind and the darkness, are but signs of that withdrawal of the cloud-current before the earth-bound waves that are mounting ever higher and higher. Gently and softly though they mount, they will presently sweep across the lips, will drown the eyes, and wash over the forehead and hair, only to retreat, their work being done, leaving behind them a new heaven and a new earth, and the man and the woman alone in the midst, gazing at one another, their cloud-crown gone for ever.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AMBRY stalked down Countess Street in a fury with himself and the world. What an abject ass he had been to try to dangle about that pretty little woman! She was a cool one, and wouldn't have minced matters with Gertrude when next she saw her. How the deuce the Edmontons were so thick there was too much for him. It seemed a thousand years since he had seen Anie. He'd never forget as long as he lived that queer little foreign *sachet* that used to hang around the sitting-room in Gordon Square. He supposed it might be awkward marrying Estelle—yes, it had come to that. He bit the word between his teeth. He'd marry her, confound her, and then perhaps he'd have a little peace of mind. Just the same, as he said before, it would be awkward having Anie for a sister-in-law. Good Lord! but it couldn't be helped. He would jolly well not see much of the family. Estelle would have to live at Appleton, whether she liked it or not. There'd be no more nonsense once she was his wife. She'd shake down he supposed, especially as there was rattling good hunting. She never looked better than on a horse. But not a word out of the girl, and it would be three weeks to-morrow that he had sent her that telegram. Dodgson was for ever forwarding rotten drivel from half the people he had ever known, but nothing, not a word, not a line, from Belgrave Square. He knew from the *Morning Post* that they were still

in town and that they were going about to all the late dances and scratch dinners of the expiring season. He must manage to hear from her before Goodwood, even if he had to put his pride in his pocket and trust to his natural swagger to carry him through. His mother thought him at Aix—why, heaven and she alone knew—so perhaps that was the tale that was going around. He didn't remember whether Lady Cassock took a cure or not. She certainly ought to, she was getting so beastly fat. If she did, he'd go along and have it out with Estelle. He would insist upon marrying in September, without a lot of silly fuss about clothes. No one would be in town then, and they could get it over decently. If Lady Cassock kicked, he rather imagined Estelle could manage her. By Jove, Estelle had certainly played him rather well. Ambry moved those splendid shoulders of his, irritatingly conscious of the yoke. Well, she was worth it. No one had ever got him so far before. He dispassionately admired her skill, itching, meanwhile, to break every bone in her fascinating young body.

“I'll go to the office and pitch in a letter now,” he decided. “If I crawl, it will touch her. If she can manage Aix, I'll cross with them. I wonder how it will seem to have Dodgson again. If I wasn't so confoundedly sorry for Gertrude I'd cut Ridges Street to-night.”

The tall, resplendent figure in the grey flannels continued to make its triumphant progress through the nauseatingly familiar streets and alleys of the sordid neighbourhood, gazed upon idly, admiringly, or viciously by its female population.

The three weeks of his voluntary exile had brought him a number of novel impressions, several of which were destined to linger with him to his permanent improvement. Some had been received in the dreary, chilly, non-committal, utilitarian office of Neighbourhood House where he worked each morning, at an unearthly early hour, over a pile of mixed communications, fabricating such engaging answers to certain correspondents that they were surprised into sending unexpectedly large cheques for the support of the cause, a regrettable impulse that they not infrequently deplored. If Ambry could thus wing his words, what was not the effect of his person? The pretty young librarian lured him into one of her story-telling evenings, and, under the spur of the villainous youngsters, sharp as knives, who swamped the desks and platform and clamoured for something more exciting than Maeterlinck, he presently found himself, a hand in the filthy rag that served the ringleader for collar, launched into a big game story, a perilous hippopotamus drive in the Congo that a chap he knew had died in, to such good purpose that before the last monster had fallen he had beaten his grimy audience to their knees. Thereafter, they shouted for more, seduced as much by the unanalyzed charm of his appearance as by his corking yarns. The simple Ambry was more flattered than he had ever been before in his life. Gertrude teased him, and the librarian smiled.

John's Greek classes, on the contrary, made him uneasy. The scheme was so patently extravagant. What could those loafers ever do on Parnassus? Why the deuce they pretended to learn at all was a puzzle to

him, until he found out by accident that they succeeded, from time to time, in worming small sums out of Johnstone-Ford. To sit in a coolish room for an hour of an evening, to pretend to follow the crazy signs the man with the bulging forehead made upon the blackboard, with the prospect of a shilling or two to jingle together in your pocket, was sufficient bait for the half-dozen semi-criminal vagrants who formed the beginner's class in poor Ford's fantastic Academia. That John couldn't see how he was being duped, that he could continue, night after night, to deploy all his science of Oxford tutor in the service of his ragged, half-insolent legion, distressed Ambry greatly. After his first experience as an auditor, he had yearned to pitch every man jack of them out into the road, but Ford at his blackboard, eagerly working out his painstaking theories on the philosophy of language, was quite unconscious of the pitiful figure he was cutting.

Ambry had got Gertrude's ear in secret, but, while she agreed with him, she admitted that she was afraid to say anything to John. Fixing Ambry with her large, troubled, near-sighted eyes, her restless hands busy with a beaded bag she was in the habit of carrying, poor Gertrude had confessed that anything, no matter how foolish, that occupied her brother's mind was just so much to the good.

"Even if the poor dear does make himself ridiculous with his Greek—how in heaven's name could it be otherwise in this abandoned neighbourhood?—why, that means just so many hours when his brain works quietly, almost mechanically, in the old, well-loved Oxford groove. It rests him, I am sure. In reality, he is hardly

conscious of those wretches sitting there in front of him. He is far off in some pleasant dream, by the banks of the Ilyssus, perhaps, teaching their beloved tongue to quick-glancing young Greeks—Plato's disciples, no more and no less. So we must leave it alone, Ambry. I feel that it will be best. You are a dear boy to confide in me. I don't know how I should have got through these weeks without you. Thank you." Gertrude had put out her hand frankly, not caring that she showed how much she was moved.

All this floated through his mind this afternoon, as, long after teatime, he let himself into 'their rooms. There he found Gertrude rambling about.

"Where on earth have you been?" she cried, "and where did you have your tea?"

There was certainly more of the mother in her maiden look than Ambry had ever surprised on the face of the good lady who actually stood to him in that relation.

"Oh, I had a beastly cup in a forsaken little bunshop in Pimlico. By the way, on my homeward route I passed the castle of the enchanted dairymaid. Do you remember the day you took me there, and we bore away a pot of cream to gorge ourselves withal?"

"Of course I do. Why didn't you stop and have a chat with the little lady?"

Innocent Gertrude, did she but know! Ambry could see himself sufficiently in perspective to smile when he recalled to mind the acid-sweetness of his reception, his panic at encountering Anie, his rage at his own fatuity in going into the place at all. It was, of course, Estelle's fault for cutting him loose. It naturally escaped

his august mind that his had been the hand to slip those silken moorings.

Ford presently came in and he and Ambry smoked, talking perfunctorily of neighbourhood affairs until dinner was served. The meal over, Jenny removed the cloth and placed on the ancient round table the cigarettes and the modest liqueur. All three were now pleasantly conscious in their different ways of that *laissez-faire* that blessedly takes possession of us at the end of a strenuous day. They dawdled over their smoke; Gertrude permitted herself two elbows on the table, and from John's face the veil of nervous exhaustion had been brushed away or had become more transparently impalpable. The wandering air of the warm July night puffed its vagrant invitation to the road into the unlighted room. Ambry, that representative of youth, was naturally the first to catch the message.

"Why don't we stretch our legs a bit to-night?" he suggested, after John had finished a rather dreary anecdote of a certain busybodyish Vice-Chancellor of none too fragrant memory.

"Let us go for a walk," repeated Ambry, looking from one to the other of his companions. "It is our duty to celebrate the fact that we are not stewing at Neighbourhood House. Come out and breathe. Why not a taxi?"

"Oh, no," said Gertrude, "they jiggle one so. To walk will do all of us good. We can cut up into some quiet streets and squares. I'll fetch my hat."

They bore away from Ridges Street, cutting up obliquely toward Eaton Place. They walked abreast, Gertrude between the two men. Their slum behind them,

they sniffed with avidity the fresher air blown across the tall elms and planes of the squares. The large, tremulous leaves threw their shadowy reproductions, as intensely black as Japanese ink, across the pavement under the lamps by the railings. You seemingly entangled your feet in these bizarre, moving patterns, but, as though you trod upon the waters, you passed on, leaving no mark behind.

"By the way, my dear boy," said Johnstone-Ford, "do you ever see young Varian Edmonton these days? They tell me he is by way of being an art critic—remarkable thing to go in for in cold blood—but I recollect that he had a very pretty style."

"How odd that you should speak of him, John, just at this moment," interrupted Gertrude. "His mother, don't you remember, sends in milk from Wimbledon to my cats and babies, and——"

"I caught a glimpse of her this afternoon in the dairy," put in Ambry, feeling it safer to make a clean breast of it. "She didn't see me. I suppose Varian was there somewhere, too. There was a girl I happen to know with them. Rather odd my running in on a party, wasn't it? Do the Edmontons know these Pantas? It seemed a very social affair. The girl is a cousin of Varian's."

Gertrude was conscious of a small spasm of surprise that Ambry had not mentioned all this before, when he first spoke of having dropped in on the dairymaid. Who was the girl? she wondered. Someone he cared for, and was vexed at? Ah, why couldn't life run smoothly? Not even for him, this magnificent youth, were the bumps and the pin-pricks spared. Poor

Gertrude felt so raw herself that she yearned after the certitude of blissful, fireside pictures, of happy homes and roly-poly children. Surely they existed somewhere in spite of slums and philanthropy.

"I'm awfully afraid, don't you know," began Ambry, fishing for words, "that I shall have to be cutting it soon. Didn't I understand from Gertrude that you'll be getting off yourselves for a holiday in a week or so? I shall hate to leave you in the lurch, but, as a matter of fact, I've had a letter" (our youth was disingenuous; he meant he had sent one), "that makes it rather necessary for me to go to the Continent, to Aix. I've cut everything rather recklessly, but I can't cut this."

Gertrude squeezed his arm sympathetically, while Ford took his speech in excellent part. John was so nervously jerky these days, you never knew what you were in for.

"My dear fellow," he began, "neither Gertrude nor I can ever be sufficiently grateful for what you have pulled us through these last few weeks. Of course, you must go back and pick up your life after this little plunge. August would be quite too impossible for you in town. Someone who brings along his own assistant will relieve me next week, and Gertrude and I will get rest and air in a little forsaken cove we know of on the Cornish coast. I only wish we could keep you with us indefinitely. Your presence has meant more than I can say. I am less nervous when I know that you are about. We mustn't lose sight of each other again. You old boys of mine bring back Oxford days when, for me, this ridiculous 'brain fag,' as I have heard it called, was

unknown and unsuspected. When we meet again in the autumn, we must look Edmonton up."

Gertrude perceived clairvoyantly that this suggestion left Ambry cold. What was there behind it? The girl-cousin stopping at Wimbledon whom Ambry had known?

"When do you think of going?" she heard John say.

"Oh, in two or three days. Would that inconvenience you? I think I can make a clean sweep of my desk in that time. When does the *locum tenens* appear?"

"Let me see. Do you recollect the exact date, Gertrude?"

"This is the 29th," she counted on her fingers. "They are due August 3, and I plan to rush off ourselves the afternoon of the very day. We go into lodgings, and put Jenny on board wages. Oh, to think of breathing the salt air once more, clean of petrol! With sand in our eyes and hair, the skin peeled off our noses, and with the appetites of Trojans, we shall give ourselves up to every wandering breeze that blows and become happy tramps, with not a thought in our heads for a month on end that is not concerned with our tummies. Heaven help our landlady, poor, misguided woman, to take such wastrels in!"

Ambry laughed. He loved Gertrude because she was so game.

"Then I shall arrange to flee when you do, not an hour before," he said, smiling down at what he could see of her eyes under that grey, reckless, tossed-about fringe.

They had turned aside into Eccleston Square because it looked broad and deserted.

"Where are we?" suddenly asked John, speaking abruptly after some quarter of an hour's silence. They knew at once by his face and his tone that the good time was over and that he had dropped back into the shadows.

"Come on, straight down Belgrave Road till we reach St. George's Square," put in Gertrude, taking her brother's arm. "There we can walk along the river toward Chelsea before we pick up a bus."

As they came abreast of the dark, leafy pool that is Warwick Square, they stepped for an instant into the long, black shadow of a man who had crossed the road from the direction of Denbigh Street. That was all—a simple incident of no importance—and they continued on their way. But the man, turning his head, took in the three with a swift look of recognition as little suspected by them as the fact that he held lightly, in that fine hand of his, the key to their subtlest mental processes, to tick them off, if so he chose, with all the assurance of an expert telegrapher. But Quin was fatigued to-night, and he received from their vibrations little beyond a vague sensation of fret and worry and pain from Gertrude; of ardour and triumph and gratification, still reined in but straining at the leash, from Ambry, his thoughts busy with Estelle; of hurrying irritation, of intense nervous exasperation, all very much blurred, from Johnstone-Ford.

Quin smiled as he noted the chastened mien of the Beautiful Youth, wandering about an unfashionable quarter of London, at night, in worn but still serviceable morning togs, far from the cherishing care of the more than maternal Dodgson. How much longer could he keep

it up? Judging from the happy insolence of his mind at this moment he had delivered an ultimatum, thinly disguised as a surrender, to the tantalizing Estelle, and the beginning of the week would doubtless see them together at Cowes or on the Continent, devouring one another, their only too natural recriminations swallowed up in the intoxicating joy of recovery and possession. Little Anie, too, had set sail once more on the heady, foamy current, but this time the shallop of her tender soul was to be manned by one who would never drop the rudder till they rode at anchor in the sunrise, both beyond the bar.

Ah, the hot, breathless London night was sweet, as sweet to Quin as a hawthorn thicket by the cool, tranquil Thames where Arnold's nightingale still sings to his lovers—sweet and fair because Bina was hidden away in it, in this tired London, turning its creaking bones, its dull, heavy, drowsy, aching old body in the stifling summer night; because Bina would be waiting for him in the back room with only a pair of candles lighted. And he would go in, and she would smile and he kind. When would she be kinder? Quin asked himself with a spasm of longing. When he dared to demand it of her, perhaps. Pshaw, he mustn't forget that it was that wretched white Pierrot who was the unhappy, the deserted one—never Harlequin, who, with a final splendid pirouette, always carried off the little lady in those long, strong, muscular arms of his. Quin slid his hands in his pockets, philosophically amused at the turn of his thoughts. It was the weather; it was Ambry and his Estelle; it was Varian and his Anie. This was the season for the elemental longing of Jack for his Jill,

and he, cloud-capped as he had believed himself to be, felt his airy empire dissolving beneath his feet, his ten toes clinging, like those of any primeval ape, to the good, fat, solid, brown earth.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MEANWHILE the three had mounted a bus that was to carry them along the King's Road, Ambry pleading for a taxi, but being overborne by an economical Gertrude. Besides, it wouldn't be suitable to wake the echoes of Ridges Street thus opulently.

"Leave the confounded brute at the corner, then," suggested Ambry, but even poor John was too inert to back him up. They found places on top, but not together, and, with his grey-flannelled knees almost in his mouth, the sausagelike arm of a worthy matron along his ribs, her weedy feather tickling his ear, her rapier of a hatpin menacing his right eye, our young gentleman, by a prodigious effort of will, forgot the human wedge he was squeezed against, forgot the animated mechanism he was atop of, forgot even his cherished self in the interests of his thought of Estelle. She would have his letter the first thing in the morning. They would send it up with her tea. Where was she singing or dancing to-night? Good heavens! What if he had lost her by his rotten philandering? What if they had met someone Lady Cassock would be backing? Oh, certainly not now at the tail end of the season. Good catches were never made in such shallow water. No, Estelle was as hard as nails. He'd set her up against her mother. She was hard, but he had hit her hard. He knew that. She'd forgive him. She must. He

had been abject enough in his letter, he whose rôle was never to crawl. That would surprise her; would carry her off her feet a bit. That was all he wanted—that and the chance to show her how steady he would hold her, how steady and how close for evermore. The memory of her was in his blood. He had jibbed; he had been afraid of her, afraid for his threatened liberty. Good Lord, what a fool! It had taken Ridges Street to teach him that he wanted her more than anything else in the world, and that he'd go on wanting her till he died. He had come thus far along the painful, narrow road. The path was rough, but salutary; you breathed good air on these heath-covered, wind-swept hills. As you walked there, feeling your way, you sniffed the purifying salt, you knew that the sea lay below, shimmering behind the last thrust shoulder of the downs. All the strange little lifeboats would be tugging at their moorings, and you, with your own captured girl under your arm, would presently be lifting her into the craft that was yours—that had been waiting for you here from the beginning, only somehow you had missed the way to it before. Estelle was almost as tall as he. He liked her so, her big eyes gazing or blazing into his with their level beam.

The catalogue of all the other charming things he liked about Estelle was rudely broken in upon by the suffocating movements, the desperate manœuvres of the worthy lady by his side. Arching one arm into something that might approximate a flying buttress, she rested her not inconsiderable weight upon Ambry's ribs, while with the other she churned at the void, vainly seeking a disgusting little newspaper packet that had seen

fit to evade her stout, incompetent grasp. Here Gertrude caught his desperate eye and was moved to compassion. "Poor little *roi en exil*," she thought, mothering the six feet or so of him, as was natural. She clutched John and they made a speedy and spectacular descent, the bus being well into its stride and the conductor rather vexed.

Estelle, after her first hot rage at Ambry, when she had so nearly flown to Wilton Place to squeeze his address out of Dodgson, had set her teeth and tried not to think of him. Oh, she could have pounded him with her fists, if his physique had been such as to make an exercise of that kind worth while. He was a cad, and she had been a fool. Having thus pigeon-holed what their respective temperaments made of them, she devoted herself to raising such personal little eddies in the rather muddy stream of the dying season as her beauty and her vigour rendered only too easy. At such a game you never play alone, and her chosen partner being an exceedingly good-looking under-secretary, or something of the kind, with a weak-lunged wife poked away in Africa for her health, there was a not inconsiderable swell of the sort of gossip that doesn't help on a girl's chances. Careful mothers, if there are really any such left, lingering on in the shaded corners, would have asked themselves what Lady Cassock could be thinking of. But the latter, having noted with satisfaction that Ambry had seen fit to withdraw, without having his departure accelerated by her biting negative to the question that she supposed to be hanging on his tongue, was, for the moment, the season well on the wane, occupied with nothing so much as her own increasing bulk.

To have had such a figure as hers and to be threatened with its extinction was to approach to your lips the bitterest cup the advancing years can brew for a woman. Etta Cassock, after that last desperate interview with her *corsetière*, knew the worst. It meant Germany; it meant the simple life; it meant exercise; it meant diet and nasty waters. She would have defied any doctor living, but she bowed that high head, with its coiffure of a decadent Roman Empress, before the stern, black bead eyes of Madame Gontet. The blow had fallen.

That night they were dining in Lowndes Square, and for the first time Lady Cassock became chillingly aware that her younger daughter was somewhat too conspicuously engaged with John Capel, who had the weak-lunged wife in Africa. He had monopolized her at dinner, and was now proceeding to do the same with the aid of a damask screen and a foolish potted fern in a remote corner of the drawing-room. Girls were geese. Anie certainly was one, but she had supposed Estelle to be not devoid of the kind of intelligence London demands for success, and here she was, sneaking behind a palm with a perfectly negligible Capel, as though she were a housemaid flirting with the second footman. Good heavens, what were well-bred girls coming to! If worry made one thin she would be perfectly safe in cutting Germany.

Meditating thus, she rustled down upon her daughter, fixing Capel, whose mother she had known as a girl, with a freezing stare through her lorgnon.

"Really, Jack, you are not quite nice, you know. No, don't get angry. We understand each other perfectly. By the way, what news do you have from

Milly? You are joining her at the recess, I suppose? Why the poor child doesn't stew down there at this season, I can't imagine. Doctors are such arbitrary brutes. Mine is packing me off to Germany at once. We are going on now. Give my love to Milly when you see the dear girl. Are you coming, Estelle? We have to pick up Mrs. Portarlington,"—and, feeling quite proud of herself, Etta Cassock turned her back on her quenched companions. Not so quenched, however, that the fire in John Capel's eyes did not try to draw an answering gleam from those proud, tired ones of Estelle. His lips on her hand, his voice in her ear. What was he begging so for? She pulled herself fretfully away, suddenly sick of the whole business.

So they were going to Germany. She had always believed Ambry to be on the Continent. Ambry! How the memory of the whole look of him came over her, overwhelmingly! John Capel dwindled to an infinitesimal black smudge on the surface of a London dinner-party. Poor man, he never quite understood that episode. His Milly is getting better and she hopes to come back this spring.

In the carriage, in the soft, warm, hazy summer darkness, Estelle learned that they were off to Germany to take a cure.

"Why not Aix?" she drawled.

"No," replied the Spartan mother, "not even Marienbad. Oh, no, no place where you might possibly meet a friendly face. That is the latest thing—unrelieved boredom, plus food so simple that you cease to think of it with anything but horror, sticky baths, and nasty water. There you are! I confess I feel a bit

sorry for you, Estelle, but after to-night I can't entertain the thought of leaving you behind."

"I don't want to be left behind, mamma," said a strangely subdued Estelle. "I am dog-tired. I'll try the sticky baths and the nasty waters."

Her mother shot a sharp look at her, but saw nothing unusual in the beautiful pure profile under the dusky web of hair, outlined against the dim, grey, lamp-lit atmosphere.

At this moment Ambry, with whom the girl's thoughts were passionately busy, was soundlessly calling to her in his heart across the feverish London night, while his body suffered the displeasing promiscuity peculiar to the top of a motor-bus. Over his throbbing eagerness swept the certainty that his letter, now the plaything of an unrivalled postal system, would be upon that cool, white bed of hers in the room in Belgrave Square tomorrow morning for her sleepy fingers to tear apart, the very first thing, before she even looked at her tea.

He spent a beastly night full-length on his long, slim bed in his narrow, stifling room. Every cat in London, it seemed to him, had chosen Ridges Street for an amorous rendezvous, led, he suspected, by Gertrude's pampered ruffians, escaped for the time from their doleful garden to chant their plaint beneath their mistress' window. He raged with the impotent desire to tear their skinny limbs asunder, but a leaden, nightmare weight on his head and chest flattened him out on his back to pass from one hot, restless, confused, half-waking dream to another. The result was as might have been expected. When the chilly, damp dawn brought its brief refreshment, he slept straight across

the breakfast-hour, and Gertrude wouldn't have him called. Therefore, when he finally made his appearance, exceedingly contrite, but resplendently fresh and scrubbed, it was to find his hostess alone behind the teapot, keeping his toast hot for him under a foolish little blue flame. John had eaten and flown, certain people of no importance having to be interviewed.

"You are frightfully good to me, you know, Gertrude," he remarked, having thanked her for his second cup of tea. "Being down here with you and John, and seeing what you do for these awful bounders, has made me pull up a bit. I assure you I am a much more serious person than when you saw me first. I'm going to settle down and try not to be more of a fool than I can conveniently help."

Gertrude was all sympathy at once.

"Oh, do!" she cried. "It is so useless racketing about town night and day. Tell me your plans?"

Being totally devoid of any save the magnificent synthesis of them all represented by the capture of Estelle, Ambry contented himself with a description of Appleton.

"It's mine, of course, and mother and Goodrich-Dow never care to go there. There isn't enough to keep it up very well, but if I really showed that I meant to stay, mother wouldn't let me starve. The hunting is ripping, and—" He was going on to say that Estelle never looked better than on a horse, but was afraid, with a gambler's superstition because he didn't yet know how she would take his letter. Jove! She had it now. He turned cold and stopped eating bacon.

"What is the house like? Wouldn't you be lonely

down there alone? Do you care for your neighbours?" asked Gertrude, not noticing his pause.

"Oh, it's a rather good house. Father did a lot to it when he married, and some of the stuff is rather decent, I believe. I mean chaps who know say so. It is comfortable, too, and the gardens used to be pretty. It takes such a pot to keep them up."

"Oh, well, if you are off hunting all day, living there alone, why bother? Flowers need more than gardeners, you know, Ambry. They need a woman."

Those kind, quizzical eyes under the grey fringe! He fell at once; in fact he had been dying to ever since they began to talk.

"I only hope to heaven there *will* be a woman there, Gertrude—at least a girl. She's made me mad about her, and now it remains to be seen what she'll do with me. The whole thing is hanging. She has my letter this very moment. I must kick my heels till I hear from her, but she is the one Appleton and I must have. She rides like a fiend, but—she'll make the flowers grow, too."

Ambry's face had never been so expressive.

Gertrude got up and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I can see her walking in that very garden now, finger on lip," she whispered smiling.

He picked up her other hand, kissed it gratefully, and then she rang for Jenny, and the multitudinous tasks of the day pressed into the foreground of their consciousness demanding to be grappled with.

It was warm and airless, with a thin summer fog that aggravated the humidity. A busy morning at his littered desk showed Ambry that he would have to devote

his afternoon to the same tedious billet if he wished to leave matters decently in order for his successor. So, after a snatched luncheon with John, Gertrude being delayed at her Shelter, Ambry sped back, hot and bored, not daring to think of a long chair at his club with a longer glass against which the ice clinked. He was rather glad, nevertheless, that he had something to occupy him other than those torturing conjectures as to what Estelle might, or might not, be going to do. He actually skipped tea, and when he finally let himself into the house, hot and tired and jumpy, the twilight, a poor, wan, dusty gold, was already dying away in the greyish shadows of the unlighted hall.

He found Gertrude, dead beat, flat on the sofa, and they had a tranquil, soothing little chat before the lamp was brought in. She, with the deftest touch, drew him out about Estelle, and she was presently in possession of all necessary and unnecessary information in regard to that young lady's mental and physical charms, with the lyrical stress on the latter as is natural to the young and ardent. Gertrude, like a good woman, revelled intensely in the romantic, and it was with very tender eyes and an inclination to see the world *couleur de rose*, that she took her place at their simple dinner-table, smiling across at John's sallow, haunted face, with Ambry at her right hand. That young man was in a badly suppressed fidget because Estelle had not telegraphed, as he had implored her to do—she might have, don't you know, confound her! She jolly well knew he was grilling. She had a deuced hard streak in her. Telegraph? Not she! Then he accepted fish that he didn't want, afraid of Gertrude's all-too-knowing eye.

Coming back from Neighbourhood House some hours later, he found the sitting-room deserted. Gertrude and John were evidently abed. He threw himself heavily into a chair. Not a word from Estelle, not a sign of life or love! Good Lord! he couldn't stand much more of that. If crawling in the purlieus of Ridges Street wouldn't do, then crawl he must to-morrow in the more spacious expanses of Belgrave Square, but hear from her or see her within twelve hours he most assuredly would.

How long he sat on in the dark, having put out the lamp for fear of Gertrude, he never knew. Strange shadows filtered in through the slowly-moving curtains, wavering in the pale, diffused light from the street. Star-bright visions of Estelle arose within him—Estelle as she danced, or walked, or rode; Estelle with that proud high head of hers, with those deep eyes that found and held and sank into yours, as though they would never let you go.

Feeling that he and sleep could have nothing to say to one another, Ambry nevertheless forced himself into his narrow cell, more from habit than anything else. Viciously striking one damp match after another, he eventually got a light, receiving at the same time what he was thereafter to count as one of the exquisite impressions of his life. Rain on the dust-choked plants of summer, the thin, icy trail of a drug in tortured veins, sleep after insomnia—the infinite refreshment of such healing balms fell at once upon Ambry's soul as the telegram leaped brazenly to meet his eye from the middle of his bed, where Jenny had disposed it for lack of a table or card-rack.

He madly tore the blessed thing open, before his ingenuous mind had a chance to be wrung with the cruel doubts a less impetuous mortal would have felt as to whether the magic paper might not be from, say, a fellow's mother. But no, Ambry had more inspired faith than that, and he was rewarded accordingly. Only to the darlings of the gods can the simple word "Come," especially if followed by the modest initial "E," be fraught with such shattering ecstasy. Away with crawling! Our young man resumed the proud ascendancy of the successful male before you realized that he had ever been on the point of dropping it. Crawl, indeed, in those spacious expanses of Belgrave Square! To-morrow would see, instead, all the processional trappings of a happy and therefore beneficent conqueror. The plaster portico, at least, should echo with the splendour of his triumph, now that Roman forums roar no longer, fallen every purple Cæsar's dome! If Ambry behaved as foolishly as any schoolboy with his ridiculous telegram, why, whose business should it be but his own? The flimsy thing certainly had curative properties, for our young man slept as profoundly with it under his pillow as if he had had all an opiate's dreamy depths to draw on.

Next morning, after hearty farewells to Gertrude and to Johnstone-Ford, Ambry dashed off to Wilton Place to start Dodgson once more into pleasurable activity about his person. Arrayed again in the proper plumage of his kind, he lunched luxuriously, smoked half a dozen cigarettes, and then made his way around to Belgrave Square at the earliest moment he dared to present himself, experiencing on the way some of those first, fresh,

palpitating sensations of the happy lover at which his youthful cynicism had acquired the habit of sneering. Ah, it was good, intensely so, to be back in your own world again, to be clad in fine linen, to be filled with delicate food, to be waking the echo of Belgravian pavements once more. He wondered if Estelle could manage to see him alone for one divine moment before Lady Cassock would proceed to envelop him in her hostile regard. He made up his mind that he'd see precious little of that good lady once he had Estelle legally under his arm.

These fugitive thoughts accompanied him into the stucco portico, but after that his mental processes became arrested, until, from the end of the long, high, dusky drawing-room he saw his beautiful girl, more beautiful and desirable than ever in her nervousness and her pallor, come openly, boldly, radiantly straight into his arms. Then, to be sure, he was less engaged in thinking than in feeling. So they had their moment, but, like high altitude, it took it out of them. Estelle, womanlike, was the first to return to a more respirable level. She drew away, and gave voice to what had been her inner parrot-cry all these weeks—"You've acted rather like a cad, you know, Ambry." But he was ready, nay anxious, to wallow in verbal abasements. He let her have them, and she sucked them in as eagerly as a small, thirsty child holding up its pouted lips to the brim of a tantalizing bowl. Ambry was profuse in explanations for the first time in his life, but, after a surprisingly short interval, Estelle showed that she cared for them not at all. She let him see, intoxicatingly, that he really was what she was after. This, in

itself, is enough to unbalance any normal youth, especially when the girl in question happens to be an Estelle, so perhaps it was just as well that Lady Cassock dawdled in at this moment, announced by the short, fretful bark of her particular Pomeranian.

"How do you do, Sir Ambry?" she remarked. "Where did you take cover?"

Lady Cassock had a maddening way of asking questions, as though she defied you to answer them, so insolently indifferent was she to you and your concerns.

Ambry muttered something about Appleton which was a patent lie. He cared not a rap. He was walking on air, and it would take more than Etta Cassock to prick his bubble now.

"We are off to a cure," went on that lady, amiably for her. "It is some new hole in Germany."

"Where?" asked Ambry eagerly.

"Oh, Kronenschlacht, or some such impossible name."

"By Jove, really?" cried our young man, feeling that the gods were indeed playing up better than usual.

"What about it?" put in Estelle, her eyes saying something much more bewildering than that.

"Mother and Mr. Goodrich-Dow are there. I've just heard. It is the very latest place where they say the waters are unimaginably nasty. How jolly! I shall see you there then."

Lady Cassock preserved her composure admirably under this announcement, but did unbend sufficiently to be civil about Lady Nunholme.

"Heavens, what luck!" mused Ambry. "Mother and G. D. will do the decent thing for me, and they can talk the old cat round. In any event, I can always

count on Appleton. If she still keeps her back up, we can cut together."

His reckless eye held Estelle with a hundred questions burning in it. She saw and understood, being clairvoyante, a sensitive for his every mood to prick almost to aching.

"Come, come, come," said her wide, deep eyes, said her hot hand lying in his, as they appeared to be exchanging a perfunctory farewell in the disenchanting atmosphere habitually diffused by Lady Cassock.

So he took himself off, blissfully volcanic, to meet Estelle the following week, both as straight and tall and fine as the young Bavarian pines they stood among, beside the kursaal of the insignificant German village, just bursting into feverish life as the last new, fashionable spa.

So Ambry carried his successful head, his whole conquering personality, about the little German spa where he was landlocked with his willing Estelle. The first barriers had crashed down. His mother was wrestling, for his sake, with a hungry, thwarted, tooth-bared, savage parent in the shape of Lady Cassock, who had marked down more spectacular, if less young and juicy, game for her beautiful girl-cub.

However, the fruits of victory would ultimately crown stout, easy Mr. Goodrich-Dow's inexhaustible cheque-book. He was proud of his stepson, and was not unwilling to be his acknowledged benefactor. So matters were more or less scramblingly arranged. Ambry, with a sufficient *dot*, was to live soberly at Appleton with his Estelle, and Etta Cassock, remembering John Capel and concentrating her mind on Ambry's physical charms, on

his not wholly to be despised stub of a title, and on the undeniable advantages of Appleton, in the heart of the best hunting country, with money enough to keep it going, decided to capitulate gracefully. This she succeeded in doing fairly well so far as Lady Nunholme was concerned, for the latter was a distinguished if stupid woman, and Etta Cassock thought it wise to be friends. In private, however, Estelle and Ambry were treated to the querulous, subacid digs that had incensed them to fury in the beginning of their infatuation. Now, however, they floated together in a serene, golden ether, too subtle to be penetrated by any such earthy darts as Lady Cassock's armoury concealed.

The cure was working, too, and the delicious consciousness of vanishing flesh, the hope growing to certainty before the end of the season that, if not the first, fine, careless rapture of perfect line, at least a presentable imitation of it, was about to be recaptured, lent Etta Cassock peace of mind, and a willingness to show herself as amiable as her tried nature would permit.

So Ambry, the slave of his tall, deep-eyed girl, although he tried desperately to hide his abasement, was on the fair, fine road to decent manhood, with the way open to develop those aptitudes that Johnstone-Ford had divined at Oxford, with healthy leisure to love and to be loved. While it was not his habit to analyze his sensations, it being sufficient for him to register them with the magnificent force and precision of his youth and vigour, some such thoughts as these drifted through his mind, as he stood one day with Estelle on a sharp, rocky spur at the top of a straggling mountain path,

just at sunset, the sumptuous purple and gold of the flooded sky in their eyes, the sighing, aromatic air of the thick-set pines in their nostrils.

It showed the progress they had made in inner harmony that neither spoke, but the girl leaned toward him, her hair and little ear against his cheek. Then it was that he had a vision of Appleton, and what their life might come to mean to both of them. All the man in him leaped to meet it; humble enough one moment to lie at her feet, superb enough the next to imagine her at his. The two natures met and mingled as he put his arm around her shoulders:

“ Ueber allen Gipfeln ist Ruh’! ”

CHAPTER TWENTY

EVER since the scene in the shop at the end of their successful tea-party, Anie's feet had had wings upon their heels. No more languid dawdling about the cool passages of the house, no more aimless trailing about the moist, fresh garden paths. Happy love set her dancing, blew her along like a dove's feather in that spicy gale you will ever find to puff the sails of galleys bound and freighted for *Cythère*. She never knew until she had lost it how the burden of the Ambry episode had cut into her thin young shoulders. Now she had straightened them up divinely, as the branch of a slim, white birch springs back, quivering through all its supple maiden length, released on a sudden from deforming pressure.

The electric atmosphere of the drive down from Countess Street to Wimbledon that afternoon had been enough for Gita, and in her bedroom that night she held her rapturous boy in her arms and told him how happy he had made her. Later, in another midnight conference, she said to him: "I'll manage Etta. To my fond mind, of course, no girl could do better, but a coronet or untold gold, one or the other, is for ever obscuring Etta's outlook. Our Anie is in disgrace, so we may be regarded in the light of salvage scooped up from the general wreck. The child seems the softest little clinging piece imaginable, but with you, my dear, she will soon show the more solid stuff of which she is

really made. The sound, firm pith is there for you to carve into what you will. She'll be your living masterpiece without a doubt. I feel almost excited these days. That my baby should be so definitely grown up as to wish to tuck a little wife under his arm! O Varian, how will you ever know what to do with her?"

They laughed, and he kissed her, his head on her shoulder, his arms locked around her waist, as they had been used to sit, years ago, during their infrequent meetings in holiday times. They decided that the engagement should remain a family affair for the moment, nothing to be officially announced until the autumn.

"Anie is still a little bruised and sensitive, poor child," went on Varian.—"It would be rather deuced awkward, wouldn't it?—if Ambry should pull it off with Estelle."

"Oh, I don't know," replied his mother. "It might, on the contrary, bring you all together again on a good, healthy, commonplace footing. No sentiment, no woman's vanity or pride, can long survive the rough-and-tumble give-and-take of intercourse between in-laws. You'll all be slanging each other in a fortnight, like a pack of children. Ambry and Anie will be only too glad to slide into such a simple relationship. It will help them both to forget that they have anything to be fidgety about. Get them so far, and—click! You'll find yourselves gathered safe and warm into the refuge of a durable, unexciting friendship."

"Anie has written to Aunt Etta," said Varian, after a pause. "That will probably bring her down on you, dearest mother. But surely they must be on the point

of leaving town? Belgrave Square is as empty as a church on a holiday."

"They are going. I had a scratch from Etta before all this happened. Her doctor is benevolently packing them off to the last new German cure. She is alarmed about her figure. Good heavens, Varian, what a life some women lead! Etta, quite unconsciously, often fills me with pity and terror. I dare say I inspire her with pure contempt, when I chance to float at all across her inner vision. But our Anie is such a sweet witch, I must some day become acquainted with Estelle."

"Oh, Estelle!" ejaculated Varian, poking out his long legs and musingly regarding his neat feet. "She is too overpowering for such simple folk as we. She and her baronet will be a magnificent pair. I hope she'll manage to keep Ambry straight. He's splendid to look upon and a good chap, too, except when he's making a cad of himself. But when he owns up, you find yourself weakening, and you don't try to punch his eye after all. Confound him! What on earth do you suppose he was really doing in the Pantas' neighbourhood? I wonder whether it was something he cooked up with Estelle? Not that it matters in the least, except that if he hadn't pounced in on Anie that day, your Varian wouldn't be the man he is this night. Mother darling, you haven't the faintest idea how unimaginably sweet she is. It melts my heart straight into water—or wine, wine of a sacrament—the greatest in all the world."

Gita, who had happened to love his father in this same fashion, became conscious of a faint, reminiscent shudder of ecstasy and of pain. They had both had

enough for to-night. With her hands on his shoulders, they looked and kissed, exquisitely, understandingly, as is given to but few mothers and sons.

The ripe August days continued to curtain Varian and his Anie, hanging silken pavilions about them in the Wimbledon garden, made up of the pale blue of the early morning sky, of the long, fluttering, gauzy, apricot-coloured scarves of twilight. Bee was swimming in romantic joy, Gita tenderer to them than ever, so work went by the board, the rooms in Cambridge Street grew dustier and dustier, and Varian practised no art save that curious, broken, birdlike, calling, recalling, interrupting, resuming, fluting, caressing, passionate one, caught by playing the sedulous imitator to the dove and the nightingale, those two living manuals of a true lover's conversation.

The suggestion that the charming and original household in Countess Street should pass a long, late summer evening with them, to disport themselves beneath the full, luscious August moon, to sing, to dance, to talk in the green, hollyhock-guarded wings, or on the clipped *tapis vert* of their sylvan stage, was not forgotten, and Gita presently dispatched an urgent invitation, giving certain open dates, to be more or less governed by the state of the moon.

It had been a fair, dry, golden season, one of those that every fifty years or so alight upon this long-suffering Isle of England, and there was every prospect for a happy fête, Pomona trailing her wreathed and laden car across the yellow fields, ripe apples dropping as she passed. In the garden, nimble magic pencils, dripping with purple, with crimson, with every suave and subtle

mixture of autumnal tones, had drawn an illuminated wreath of flowers down every path, around every *bosquet*, so that they blazed and sang in the sunlight, as gay, as daring, as inspired as those in any painted Persian manuscript. In the square, lobby-like hall of the house it pleased Gita for the moment to fill the pots and bowls and osier baskets with fruit instead of flowers, and your delighted eye was played upon with such harmonies of violet grapes, of apricots, bursting their plump, freckled sides, of golden plums, of pears, elegant, tapering, inviting your teeth in their luxurious russet contours, that you instinctively saluted once more the genial, opulently-minded Venetian whose name has always been illogically associated in our cooler northern imagination with just this species of pagan decoration.

Facing these trophies of the living time, low on the staircase wall hung a large, drowsy Poussin, exactly in character, in whose mysterious bronze-green depths Actæon or Apollo, Endymion or Meleager, might fitly pursue goddess, nymph, or simple maid. Gita had had a couch and a few basket chairs and thin-legged tables placed in this hallway, near the wide entrance to the terrace, and here they sometimes had tea when the wind or the sun was too insistent for her tired eyes out of doors.

Rather liking this cool nest she had made for herself, for all footsteps were hushed in the quiet house of an afternoon, Gita had taken to lounging here by herself, with her drawing-pad and her books, while Varian and Anie roamed the garden through, or took the car for breathless, cross-country flights. The sketches she

produced were frequently bizarre, and Varian thought them awfully jolly when he caught a glimpse of them, but one could see that the dear boy's eye really observed and noted when but one solitary object was presented to his retina, *i.e.*, this sidling young thing, this Anie, with the flat, childish figure, and the soft, scented, wine-dark cloud of hair, a rather pathetic bud still, but hiding for him, so he passionately continued to feel, all the promise of the ripest, the most golden autumn.

They were sitting very near together on a small green bench beside the Bois at the close of a warm, airless day toward the end of the month. Streaked, livid clouds piled themselves thunderously in the West, out of which began to creep a thin, damp breeze.

"Rather gloomy prospect for to-morrow," remarks Varian, knowingly squinting up one eye.

"Don't try to look like the Ancient Mariner, you adorable humbug," replies his companion, her hand fast in his. "Why disturb yourself? I simply know that it will not rain to-morrow, but that the sun will shine on all the late roses, making them smell, smell, smell, that the moon will pop up, really almost too ridiculously full, that the grass will be as dry and as soft as cotton-wool, and that we shall sit here—or rather I, especially, shall sit here with that delightfully mysterious Mr. Quin, and I shall sing to him, strumming on my little guitar, and then perhaps he'll dance——"

"And what of me, by Jove, I should like to know?" demands a justly incensed Varian. "What am I supposed to be doing while you are shamelessly flirting with Quin?"

Anie gurgled like a fatigued thrush. "Oh, you—

you are to play the demure antiquary with old Mr. Pantà, who simply worships you—anyone can see that.”

“Humph,” rejoins Varian, succeeding in producing that purely theatrical sound quite successfully. “I rather fancy myself, on the contrary, with that rosy Mistress Bina, just far enough behind this hollyhock clump to escape your eagle eye—for you’ll be watching me, you little haughty body! You know you simply can’t bear me out of your sight.”

He challenged her, his whole face softening under the rush of feeling behind the teasing words. She met him gallantly, answering what the eyes, not the lips demanded.

“You are the dearest little person for a chap to have for his very own,” said Varian after a pause. “I never knew before that I had it in me to be as jealous as a Turk. I’d like, with one part of my will, to swathe you in veils up to those aggravating eyelashes, and to lock you in my Tower of Ivory, but, with the other, better part of me, I’d bring you the key on a silken string, and you could walk out into the open bazaar, over my heart with your little feet, if so it pleased you.”

She rubbed her cheek against his arm. “What do you take me for?” she asked naturally enough.

“I’ll tell you another time. It would make too long-winded a tale now. Come, let us decide what you are to sing to-morrow, in order to ravish our guests. You tune your tiny pipe very well to ancient things. Old Mr. Pantà will like that. Mother said you had found something in the library. What is it? One of Master Lawes’ innocuous ripplings?”

"No; someone not quite so well known, but of course you will have heard of him—a Philip Rossiter, who describes himself as a Lutenist."

"Oh, is that his name—the fellow who wrote the music for Campion's 'Booke of Aires'? Is that what you found?"

"It is, with some of the most charming, quaint, tinkling things. As they were written for the lute, I can manage them very well on my guitar—at least well enough for out of doors, in moonlight, when the severest hasn't the heart to be critical. Shall we go up to the house and practise them now? The first one I have chosen begins:

*Follow your saint, follow with accents sweet!
Haste you, sad notes, fall at her flying feet!*

And then, should the applause become—tumultuous, I shall sing that dear,

Rose-cheeked Laura, come,

as an encore."

"Remain tranquil," said Varian solemnly. "With Bee and myself as *claque*, night will be made sufficiently hideous, and your rose-cheeked Laura will be in danger of turning purple, so eager will she be to burst forth to stay our frantic clamour. Count on us, my dear. Hadn't you better have two up your sleeve?"

He pulled her gently to her feet, tucked her arm well up under his, and turned toward the terrace from which the house, its solid Georgian block spiritualized by the pale, broken, afternoon light, fronted them with ample

dignity above the mauve and lemon, bronze and crimson and gold of the waning garden.

The windy night that followed, tearing at the ivy-ropes, and scattering seed-pods and coloured petals like confetti all along the wet, shining paths, did not bring that rainy morrow once so melodiously dreaded by our ever-living poet. Instead, the mild, warm, faint, mist-thickened, golden-powdered, August sun came in Anie's windows, pointing taper fingers across the thin silk coverlet of her bed, waking her out of her early morning drowse to pleased, childish contemplation of the cheerful, broadening light. It stole equally through the darker London air, finding entrance with as inquisitive an insistence to the little house in Countess Street, arousing Bina in her warm, white nest, so that she stirred and smiled, lifting herself on one rounded elbow, shaking back her brown hair to make sure that no surly raindrops were dripping from the laburnum. Quin it found broad awake, watching its approach with deep, quiet, unsurprised eyes. He lay as Ambry did, straight as an arrow, the spent arms folded, the whole admirable body lax. Through what dark hours had he not been thinking! until now, in the full dawn, he moved to meet the day and Bina, determined, as the fruit of meditation, as the result of the havoc wrought in mind and body, to tell that charming young woman that she must love him or let him go. The torture inflicted on his senses by this daily, friendly, homely intercourse was becoming rather too much of a St. Lawrence grill.

Panta, for his part, was as happy as a child to see the sun. The anticipated fête at the home of his cherished young friend Varian, the opportunity to study once

more that graceful woman, his mother, whose Italianate silhouette recalled forgotten episodes of the old dim days in town or villa, set Panta chirping about the back room, brushing the well-worn suit of sober black that was to robe him, the broad, old-fashioned hat that was to shade his ancient brow so benignantly.

As a matter of fact, he was dressed and ready hours before Varian was to pick them up, sitting a little stiffly in his leather chair, not reading, but turning gently, with the knowing fingers of a bibliophile, the thick yellow leaves of those "Memoirs" Goldoni wrote to ease his later, worn, uneasy hours, he "good, gay, sunniest of souls," as that sympathetic Mr. Browning so cleverly puts it, fallen on evil days far from his sprightly Venice. Panta knew it all so well, had, in fact, been one of that merry party on the Brenta, but Cubical life demands exacting tolls, and the cloud-capped memory grows shorter and shorter, as the tale of Cube-lived years lengthens out into the twilight of what is said to be old age. So Panta could recall his past only in vague, blurred snatches, not as an actual experience, but rather as an animated description of something that might once have occurred to any eighteenth-century worthy. Occasionally a winged shaft, such as Gita shot from her soft Italian eyes with their *bistre* shadows, would set some intense inner chord vibrating, and, for an instant, he would be back again in a slip of a street as dark as a velvet pocket, or bright with Southern moonlight, the air carrying to eager ear and nostril the dying fall of the violins, the scent of the orange in flower.

Bina busied herself in her small, commercial domain,

as was her habit of a morning, whisking her fresh print gown from counter to window, serving all and sundry with a smiling willingness that was as soothing as a benediction to the weary, bored, querulous, harassed mortals who constituted her ordinary *clientèle*. On the trail of a smart young buttons who gamboled by about eleven o'clock for three impeccably fresh eggs, pretty Nurse Elsie dropped in, free for a moment from her babies and her cats, to chat with Bina who fascinated women of her own age as easily as she did more inflammable material.

After Elsie had discharged her small change of neighbourhood gossip, she asked mysteriously: "Did you ever happen to see a very handsome young man who lived with the Johnstone-Fords? Really stunning, you know, with such eyes! He came once to the Shelter with Miss Johnstone-Ford, and I don't mind telling you that I dreamed of him. Now do you know what I have just found out from that close-mouthed Jenny?"

Nurse Elsie lowered her pretty, bebonneted head, her blue eyes shining, her red lips caressing their little secret. Bina forbore to show by the faintest sign that she knew what was coming. Why not humour this engaging female creature whom Ambry's unfailing magic had beguiled as easily as it had so many of the wiser and more subtle?

"He's a baronet, my dear, no less," pursued Elsie triumphantly. "Not Mr. Holmes at all, as we were given to understand, but Sir Ambry Nunholme. What do you think of that? I must say he looks it, every inch. Jenny let it out, but, of course, it's a secret. Why shouldn't he be a duke? I'm sure it would be more

in keeping to call him Your Grace than some of those shabby old men they tell me have the right to it. Did he ever come here?" Elsie asked, feeling instinctively that this pretty Miss Bina, who seemed so superior in some ways, would be just the sort to catch the roving eye of a beautiful, disguised baronet.

"Oh, once, with Miss Johnstone-Ford," replied Bina carelessly. "It was about the Wimbledon milk, I remember. He was so tall he shut all the light out of the doorway, so that I could scarcely see him. You will want the same quantity of milk every day?" went on Bina, willing to carry the conversation back to its proper channel. She succeeded, and there it became anchored for a moment or two longer in a soft, creamy, eggy stream till Nurse Elsie took herself off, pleased with her shared confidence. At the corner of Countess Street she ran across Quin, whom she knew by sight.

"He's almost as good-looking in his way as Sir Ambry," she said to herself. "I wonder if Miss Bina——" but here we must stop our prying in the small, close backwater of that youthful, middle-class mind, lest we choke and splutter and say harsher things than we really mean. Pass, Nurse Elsie.

Quin found Bina in the back room, setting out a luncheon-tray.

"Do sit down for a moment," he said.

She looked up at him, threw up her hands in mock acquiescence, and sat down in her little chair.

"Forgive me," said Quin, "for bullying you, but I slept badly last night, and it rests me to see you, just you, gentle, quiet, unoccupied, sitting near me for five minutes. Do you think me slightly mad to be talking

in this way at half-past eleven of a clear, warm, summer's morning? Mad, if you will, but almost happy looking at you in front of me."

Bina down in her prophetic heart did feel a bit disturbed, for she responded like a clairvoyante to that impetuous, passionate undercurrent that she knew to be flowing deep and dark and strong behind Quin's slightly fantastic address. She must manage to keep him quiet for—oh, a day longer. She must have time to catch her breath, to set her little feet firmly on the brink, to squeeze her heels into the yielding soil, before, with eyes wide open, with hair blown back, with her whole body straining and kindling to his touch, she forces herself to the ultimate plunge into what she knows will be life and light and joy unspeakable. But, being a woman, she must have her foolish little shivering moment first.

So they both shared mutely for an instant their consciousness of that rock in midstream, dim, unknown, but not forbidding; enticing, rather, hung as it was in vapourish, sun-flushed clouds, miraculously selected to be the scene of their ultimate shipwreck, its dark, wet mass ordained to transform itself, at their first desperate impact, into a soft, warm, illimitable Ark of Salvation.

But the hour was manifestly not yet. Therefore Bina went on with her luncheon-tray, while Quin lit his pipe and made conversation. Bina resketched for him Nurse Elsie's communication in regard to Ambry.

"He has, I suppose," remarked Quin when she had finished, "rebounded into his native element once more. He and the tall maid we saw him sulking with that eve-

ning will make a proper pair. The little lady at Wimbledon has chosen the better part in Master Varian, a charming lad with a distinct zest to him. We shall have our moon and our music to-night, and young love sucking in the bliss of it almost as unconsciously as the roses."

Alas, Quin, can't you keep the temperature of your voice down any better than that?

"Yes, how jolly," returned Bina, little wretch, as matter-of-fact as you please.

Here Panta drifted in, questing for luncheon, as noiselessly as a piece of hungry thistle-down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

VARIAN came for them in the early twilight, accompanied by his shy young lady who had motored up from Wimbledon to protect him, so she said, from the Metropolitan Police. With her beside him, and Peters bobbing about like a split pea in the tonneau, he was apt to become so oblivious of time and space that a Herbert Spencer would have regarded him with a mixture of horror and contempt, and a framer of speed limits could scarcely have suffered his presence. In deference to Mr. Panta, however, the sorely-tried, proper Peters took command of the wheel, and Varian fitted himself in very agreeably with Bina and Anie and Anie's delightfully mysterious Mr. Quin. The latter devoted himself to drawing Anie out, having a clever hand with the opening minds of the young of all species, with kittens, puppies, or tender maids, especially when the latter are head over heels in love and as pellucidly transparent, in that delicious state, as the very particular pool of Narcissus.

Gita, in a white gown, with long, slender, quivering, sparkling ear-rings that became her well, welcomed them, standing on the flight of shallow steps at the head of the dusky entrance avenue. Bee hovered behind her like a purple shadow. The evening light warmed the ancient yellowish façade, intensifying ivory tones in pillar and portico, rounding and deepening the mysterious mass of the ivy, striking a last, fugitive spark from a

gilded weather-vane in the shape of a gallant steed, cob built, with his cloaked and dapper rider.

After a delicate, leisurely meal they lingered for a moment in the hall.

"Children—Varian, Anie," began Gita, standing tall and slim and white and fragile, with the tips of her pretty fingers on the delighted Panta's arm. "Take Miss Panta and Mr. Quin into the garden. Go down to the Bois. The fruit and coffee have been carried there. You will find cigarettes. The air and light are so divine you must not lose a breath or a gleam. Mr. Panta and Bee and I will join you presently. We want to rest here for a moment to talk of Italy and Poussin."

"I see Italy in your face, ma'am," said Panta, after the young things had gone on. "It's not so much a given line or feature, it's a look you've caught. I've noticed the same thing many times in their portraits. It grows out of a certain habit of thinking. There used to be a country house near Sienna, and the lord of it had his lady painted half a hundred times. There they hang, the fifty of 'em, in a long gallery open to the garden, and after some years, as you may imagine, they became very mouldish and spotty with the damp. But the look of all of them, ma'am; you never could mistake it. It sang out the blood of the country, with the wine and the olive in the cheek, and the sunshine in her eyes. He had her painted, decked out in old dresses from his wardrobes, and her neck and head sprang out of the ancient stuffs like lilies from a bunch of weeds."

"How extraordinary!" breathed Bee, quite overcome by the style of the old gentleman's conversation. "Do

you suppose one could see the pictures now, if one knew the villa? ”

“Gone, gone,” replied Panta, coming back to himself with difficulty. It would never do to let the ladies suspect to quite how vanishing a length his memory went sometimes. That lady of his, for example, had smiled her golden smile before ever this house in which they stood had risen a course high. So he retreated gently. “Gone, gone, broken up, sold, like so many of them. You know, ma’am,” turning to Gita, “how the hills and valleys roundabout there are all full of lonely, decaying dwellings, with creepers choking the gardens, and no water in the fountains any more. It’s years since I was there, but I know what it was in my time.”

“I have lived there, too,” said Gita, “with my Italian father’s people, principally in Rome, but I know the hills and the enchanted loggias, high on their terraces, dreaming over the olives and the ilexes. Varian and I must buy one some fine day. Life goes easily there, and you smile at the slightest thing, at a lizard on the broken wall, or a bough of cherries, exactly like the Last Duchess.”

She looked down gently and kindly on her guest. Panta did not catch the allusion, although he had heard of Mr. Browning, Quin having shown him the sonnet on Goldoni.

“That bronze-dark picture,” she went on, turning toward it with a movement of her graceful head, “might be any wood, along any height, in the Apennines. Alas, for people like you and me, Mr. Panta, no more for us shall such green glades show a hero or a goddess. We were born too late. I lie here of an afternoon and dream

myself back to an eternally vanished Golden Age that might, perhaps, after all, have been quite as boring as this iron and steam one. We are so apt to magnify the charms of a given epoch or environment, quite forgetting that we have our personalities immovably around our necks, clutching us like so many Old Men of the Sea."

Here Panta saw a splendid opening for a neat excerpt or two from his immortal friend, the "Gymnast," but he forbore, recollecting vaguely some admonition to the effect that pure philosophy is disturbing, if not actually harmful, to ladies. So he contented himself with saying: "True, true," very wisely, observing at the same time that nobody has yet painted an olive tree as it should be done.

"Catch the light just so on a slope of them, and, in a wink, you seem to hear and understand all the poetry that has ever been sung or written."

"Why, you are a poet yourself, Mr. Panta," exclaimed Bee, quite taken with this curious little man who appeared, so oddly, to draw upon an amazingly extended experience.

This frank and flattering estimate turned Panta shy and silent for a moment, so Gita seized the opportunity to suggest that they join the others in the Bois.

"Did you see Varian take Anie's guitar, Bee?" she asked, as they walked through the dim hall toward the open square of the great door, framing in perspective a pale, tree-darkened, hedge-set, mist-softened segment of the brooding twilight garden.

"Mr. Quin was carrying it, I think," replied Bee. "Does your daughter sing, Mr. Panta?"

"She has a tender little note or two, that is all," returned Panta, always slightly confused when these good people dotted the i's and crossed the t's of his paternity. That he should be considered the father of his beautiful Columbine smote his heart with tenderness. They were kind, they were wonderfully kind, this sweet woman and her son, and he would have liked to be quite frank with them, but, oh Lord! how announce yourself as the only and original Pantaloon, the veritable incarnation of the spirit of Comedy? It would never do in the world. Such an announcement would be considered shocking bad taste, to say the least, and he would doubtless stand a fair chance of finding himself in the English equivalent for a *maison de santé*, cheap and quiet.

"She dances, you know," he added. "Light on her feet she is, marvellously."

"What a charming art that is," mused Gita, stopping a moment to pinch gently between finger and thumb a particularly full and enticing rosebud, its tiny petals lapping one upon another like a series of small, downy pink tongues. "To me there is something hypnotic in the delicious posturing, the trembling on the delicate toes, the dazzling patterns of the white, weaving arms. Your good dancer is a poet——"

"Or, what is better, he or she makes one of you, ma'am," interrupted Panta. "Let me tell you," he continued, the glorious secret trembling on his lips. What if he should inform her that she had the honour of entertaining the immortal Harlequin, that spoiled darling of gods and men, that incarnate spirit of youth, of folly, of laughter, and of tears? In a particoloured rush of vagrant memories, he stood once more in the im-

provided wings of who can say what Italian stage, jostled by men in satin coats, with orders or diamond stars on their laced and befrilled breasts, with powdered perruques or with their own hair brushed back and tied in a black ribbon, as young Herr Wolfgang v. Goethe was used to wear his. They surrounded him, these merry personages, as he waited his turn, laughing, jesting, watching their darling Columbine as, after that last, inimitable, birdlike rush of hers—alas, a fair, wounded bird, trailing a broken wing—she is caught up triumphantly in the strong arms of the enamoured Harlequin and borne off amid a shower of roses. The very smell of the dust assaulted his nostrils, beaten out of the old wooden parquet. He felt once more the silken elbows in his ribs. The gibes at poor old deceived Pantaloon rang once more in his ears. Where was he? What was he?

“You were saying, Mr. Panta—?” broke in Gita’s cool, sweet voice, seeming to come to him through space, across all the dry, burning, summer plain of Lombardy. He looked around him, on the fair tranquil English garden, on the quiet woman at his side. He caught Bina’s soft, gurgling laugh; heard Varian’s deeper note as he replied. Good heavens! he had quite lost himself this time. He really must be more careful.

“I was about to say,” he recommenced, “that Quin has taught Bina all she knows of dancing. He is quite extraordinary, they tell me. He trains young ones for the opera—an exacting business.”

“Oh, do you think—?” began Bee breathlessly. And then stopped.

Gita smiled. “You see before you, Mr. Panta, our

sylvan stage. Do you think your young people might be tempted by that excellent green turf? Upon what a pleasure it would be for us, I need not insist. My niece can produce a little accompaniment for them, if they wish it, after she has sung to us. Do you happen to know any of good Doctor Campion's Masques? Anie ran across his quaint 'Booke of Aires' in the library, and will restrum something of his for us to-night. We must imagine her guitar to be a lute, and may tickle ourselves with the thought, if we please, that Will Shakespeare may have hummed any one of these songs to himself, as he walked about that fine new house of his at Stratford, a little bored and strange, perhaps, so far from London and his mates. But if Mr. Quin and Miss Panta consent to dance, we shall have a fête indeed."

"Who is to dance, mother—your boy?" inquired Varian, coming to meet them, his fair, bare head that of any stainless cavalier in the clear, primrose-coloured evening light.

Gita squeezed his arm.

"We are to look for something exquisite, if our guests consent, my dear," she said, "not any of your innocent prancings."

"What, oh, what?" chirped Anie from her place by the little table, on which coffee and fruit had been spread.

Gita smiled at Bina and then turned her eyes on Quin, the supple perfection of his long, admirably proportioned members being now explained to her.

"Dare I?" she asked, with her charming smile, looking from one to the other. "Doesn't our greenwood

stage tempt you? Will you beguile us with your beautiful art? The cat is out of the bag. I know you dance, and, to be perfectly frank, I am mad to see you do it."

Who could resist Gita when she chose to take this tone? Certainly not Quin, who was very much alive to her rather veiled, exotic attraction. He flamed inwardly as he turned to look at Bina. Were the old days to come back for one rapturous moment? Were they to dance again together here in the moonlight, in the soft, warm air, as they had done so often ages ago under the stars of those maddening, perfumed, Italian nights? If they did, and she let him carry her off in his arms after her last, desperate, simulated flight, as of a bird with a broken wing, he swore to himself that he'd never let her go so long as they both should live. But all he said was, in quite a level voice:

"Will you, Bina?"

And she, looking over her shoulder at him, provokingly unmoved, replied:

"To be sure. I think it would be great fun."

Gita smiled to herself, seeing how the wind set. They had both forgotten her so completely.

Anie and Bee hovered around Panta, seeing that he had a peach peeled daintily for him, since he did not care for coffee. This business being over, they found themselves grouped on the edge of the green, hedge-bordered semicircle. The moon had risen sufficiently high to light them with that pallid radiance of which she is past-mistress. Gita lay, a white, gracious shape outstretched on the couch, with Quin seated on one side of her and Panta on the other. Varian engaged Bina and Anie in a whispering dialogue, gay enough, judging by

the laughter it evoked. Then the guitar was tuned amid flying volleys of unsolicited advice.

Presently across their murmuring talk the girl's pure, soft, liquid, languid note uprose, floating like a silver thread through moonlight and dew, carrying to their ears the quaint words of Champion's song, set to a charming, unfamiliar measure. She was a pretty sight, her little head that bore its crown of rippling hair as easily as a flower bent over her guitar, the white fingers picking at the strings, the music swelling in that warm, round throat. Varian, his hands clasped around his knees, couldn't take his eyes off her. Quin was in no better case. So she sang it through, ending on the proper pitch of wounded pride:

*Then let my notes pursue her scornful flight!
It shall suffice that they were breathed and died for her
delight.*

The plaint of this dawning seventeenth-century poet lover sounded as poignantly in this moonlit garden as it had three hundred years ago when you stopped that morning at Philip Rossiter's own house in Fleet Street, near to the Greyhound, to pick up these sheets, fresh and fresh, to hurry home to try them in your study, bending over your Orpharion as you sang, brooding upon the fair woman who was exasperating your nerves at that moment. . . . Three hundred years ago!

Panta, exquisitely sensitive to such evocations, and less able to control their effect than Quin, felt as though his eyelids were being too insistently brushed by the Wing of the Past, figured as a great spreading dark bird of the night.

The efforts of the amateur *claque* were quite submerged in a general acclaim. Varian saw no reason to refrain from kissing the singer's hand not once but twice. Bina leaned over the little figure to tell the girl how she loved her voice.

"Delightful, darling," murmured Gita, immensely pleased.

Panta and Bee agreed that you heard nothing half so taking at the opera (neither of them ever went), and Quin said something quite too technical for me to repeat, as one musician speaking to another, and was very pleasantly complimentary in regard to the way she handled her voice and picked at her strings. Altogether it was a most agreeable success for our young lady, and a happy picture and text for those who saw and heard her to store away for the contemplation of their inward eye and ear when those exacting organs should demand fair flesh and airy concords.

"Don't fancy you are going to stop, you know, my child," began Varian, as Anie laid her guitar on the table, pushing aside the coffee cups and inciting the little silver spoons to emulous fairy tinklings.

"She privately confided to me," he went on, turning to the others, "that, if properly pressed, she had another song up her sleeve. Hence, it is my manifest duty to—press." He rose with determination in his eye.

"Must I, Gita?" cried Anie, laughing and drawing back behind Bina, who put her arm around her.

"Romney would have made something of that," remarked Gita to Quin, pointing the sticks of her fan at the enlaced figures of the two girls, washed in moon-

light, in their misty, white, scant frocks, their brown, luxurious hair, their soft, engaging curves of youth, of grace, of beauty.

Every nerve in him leaping to acquiescence so far as Bina was concerned, Quin was heard to reply, dryly enough, that undoubtedly Romney would. Then they reseated themselves, and prepared to be ravished anew.

So followed the evocation of Campion's *Laura*, that fair, rose-cheeked one, in this faintly rustling, perfumed night garden, accomplished by Anie's simple art. To her low, broken accompaniment, to her call to

Rose-cheeked Laura, come,

that delicate seventeenth-century phantom seemed to float across the greenwood stage:

Rose-cheeked Laura, come;

Sing thou smoothly with thy beauty's

Silent music, either other

Sweetly gracing,

so the fanciful lines ran.

"'Thy beauty's silent music,'" repeated Quin to himself, watching the white, pure oval of Bina's face, the long lashes shadowing the dreamy eyes, the warm, tender mouth.

Lovely forms do flow

From concent divinely framed;

Heaven is music, and thy beauty's

Birth is heavenly.

So sang Anie, with a high, clear rush of crystal dropping notes.

*Heaven is music, and thy beauty's
Birth is heavenly.*

"How intensely the Elizabethans felt their life, and how divinely they spoke their love," thought Gita, moving her fan softly to and fro, brushing its feathers musingly across her lips.

When the pretty performance had ended, amid a renewal of applause and compliments, and Anie had come shyly to seat herself on the edge of the couch, squeezing her little body gently against Gita, displacing her silky draperies, the latter, with her arm around the girl, repeated to the company at large the platitude that had crossed her mind in regard to that long-suffering folk, the subjects of England's Diana, the great Eliza.

"Without speaking of the sonnets—enter that Enchanted Wood ye who dare!" said she, "how amazing it appears to us that secondary poetasters of the period struck out, as quite a common thing, certain expressions as fine, as spacious, as vivid, as new minted, as you can find in the very highest himself. Think of Donne—or rather don't," she added in laughing warning, "for if you do, you will do nothing else—how passion in him leaped white-hot into the words he used to paint it. Some of those little poems are like medals of the great age, so finely cut, so deeply incised that the impression you receive from them is as fresh as though the poet himself had come to lay them in your lap."

"I never read modern poetry either," put in Panta, who had a perfect frenzy for agreeing slavishly with

anything Gita said. "Why should one, when what you point out is so true? The fine things have all been said——"

Quin and Varian protested vehemently, as became them in their different rôles of secret and proclaimed lovers. To your true lover nothing has ever been said in love-language that exactly suits his case—there is still to be sought the quintessential refinement, the flaming, starry apex that shall crown his particular thoughts of his own particular never-before-so-beloved mistress.

Gita listened to their spirited defence of the twentieth century's right-to-live-poetically, but shook her head nevertheless, saying to Panta:

"We are content to wait, Mr. Panta. When they bring us the shining golden spurs they have won in open tilt with our great dead, why, then we shall buckle them on with joyful fingers, and give the accolade with a right good will. But that time is not yet."

"Wait till you hear my 'To Anie, Singing,'" said her son darkly, casting a killing look at the young lady in question, sitting in the warm shelter of his mother's arm.

"You'll have Mr. Fortescue in your hair," remarked his little love, "if you neglect your proofs for me."

"Oh, I'm working up something to keep him quiet. I ran across it the other day,—a most curious thing. It should be set to music. In fact, it *is* to music, but 'frozen, dumb, till I come,' meaning, of course, the musical chap."

"My dear child, you rave," interrupted his mother. "The moonlight has done its worst with you. What is

this about 'frozen music'? Didn't poor old Somebody-or-Other apply the phrase to architecture?"

"He did, dear one," replied her son, as patient as a headmaster with an incredibly dull child, "but that isn't what I mean. It seems that in one of the smaller, less frequented, less illustrious cathedrals of our Continental neighbours——"

"Why this mystery?" murmurs Bina.

"Because if I told you, you'd all be rushing there. Well, an inquisitive traveller, storm-bound in the little town, spending more time in the cathedral than he had intended—in fact, wet day after wet day—discovered to the best of his belief that the curious wood-carving in the choir-stalls—irregular, bizarre, fantastic, grotesque, better suited in subject, sometimes, for a cabaret than a church, but the figures are so tiny many people do not find this out—formed, in reality, nothing less than a series of musical notes, in a gigantic scale, meandering up and down, all over the backs and sides of the stalls. Think how it would sound if someone, more subtle or less easily baffled than our traveller, were to discover the real notation and release the hidden melody to send it soaring up into the dusky vaulting! Our man, becoming more absorbed in his theory as the weather grew wetter and wetter, even conceived this dumb music to re-echo in the arrangement of the carved figures of the capitals, escaping like a whiff of incense through the north portal, to be carried up by the flying buttresses, to float out into the frosty air, being spewed at length, violently, in some shattering discord, from the open, ferocious, carnivorous, stone mouths of the gargoyles. But it always escaped him. He never

got it down on his sheets of accurately-ruled paper. He has merely given us the tip. We must go and hear it with our spiritual ear."

"If the little figures are so horrid," remarked Anie, "perhaps the music would not be very nice."

They all laughed.

"There is a most curious idea in that story," said Quin. "Did someone actually throw out the notion, or did you make up both your traveller and your cathedral gently to pull our leg?"

Varian protested his good faith. "I have used poetic license, perhaps, to furnish forth the tale. Pass the inquisitive traveller, but the thing has really been said about the choir-stalls at Amiens. Do you remember them?"

"Not well. England has swallowed us up. When you go there again, and should Miss Cassock be of the party, she must take her guitar, and in some dim corner when the Sacristan isn't looking she must bend her ear to the strings to hear, perhaps, that imprisoned melody thrilling along them into life again."

"What a charming idea, Quin," broke out Bina. She had not spoken to him since her agreement to dance, but her eyes had nevertheless been full of him, her hand eager to slip into his, her ear to hear those powerful heart-beats pounding so tumultuously beneath her flushed cheek, laid for an instant on his breast in a movement of the dance.

The moon floated clear of any cloud in the mild night sky; the soft turf seemed like a cool, smooth carpet; the tall, motionless tops of the planes spread themselves into a rifted canopy through which a star

or two faintly shone; the branched hollyhocks, so crimson and rosy in the sunlight, had grown of a uniform, opaque pallor; the clipped circle of the Bois through which the sun was wont to fall in dappled blotches, now presented a close, unbroken expanse of shade, like some stretched, velvet curtain of the dark. In this garden silence, beneath which ever runs a murmurous whisper of minute life, who amongst them but did not lose himself in half-formulated dreams, his senses played upon so exquisitely by chosen instruments that stimulation was never pressed beyond the stage of delicious languor? No one spoke, each being willing to lend himself to the benign influence of this natural magic that whispered in your ear that you were as a god, and had merely to stretch out your hand for all that was fair and lovely in life and living. London with its roaring reality lay farther off at this moment than most distant Ind.

“Do you recollect, Quin,” said Panta at length slowly, as though picking his way with care amid a confusing multiplicity of ancient associations, each one beginning to stir in its cold, dusty mantle, endeavouring to send again some faint, forlorn message to the outside world still vibrating with light and heat, “that villa near Lucca where the Count used to give theatricals in front of his garden-house? Does not this turf stage remind you of the place, only there a pointed cypress like a pencil stood guard in place of these hollyhocks?”

“Oh, yes, I remember perfectly,” replied Quin, getting on his feet. “It was early spring and the night-gales were splitting their little brown bodies with

song. We danced, do you remember? I was Harlequin to Bina's Columbine. Shall we try it again now? Here is the garden, the moonlight, the soft grass, and an audience of indulgent friends. They must do their best to imagine our costumes. The Count, Italians being passionate amateurs of the old *Commedia dell' Arte*, pranked us forth from his *garderobe*."

There was a rustle of pleasant anticipation. Gita thanked Quin with one of her expressive smiles, accompanied by a shifting of her slight body, so that she could rake the Bois from side to side. Bee and Panta took their places nearer the couch, fearful of missing the least movement, and Varian enticed Anie away from his mother to seat her in a deep basket chair while he coiled himself at her feet, his head touching her knees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BINA rose, quite serious now, for she loved her beautiful art. Although she and Quin had not danced together since they had started their strange, new, *bourgeois* life in London, every nerve and muscle told her that she had not lost her old-time power. She trembled slightly like a spirited colt, stretching her arms above her head in a charmingly unpremeditated gesture—that of a rosy child trying to wake itself up. Her little thin white frock had rows of buttons cunningly arranged at each side above the ankle. To loosen these was the work of an instant's stooping, and the pretty legs in their white silk stockings thus gained the desired freedom of movement. Her narrow, low-heeled, black-strapped slippers, made on the model of those in which she had ever been accustomed to dance, now served her turn admirably.

There was Quin beside her, slender and easy and proud and fine, holding out his hand. She took it, almost in a dream, seeing nothing but his face, feeling nothing but his touch, conscious of him, and of no one else in all the world, from her head to her feet. In that moment, by virtue of the cloud-current that he could still control, though the power to do so was slipping from him faster and faster as his love for the fair woman at his side increased in Cubical ratio, Quin was able to communicate to Bina the electric impetus that had animated his life as Harlequin, hers as Columbine, but that she, as more impressionable, had

well-nigh lost under the disintegrating yet humanizing influences of the little shop in Countess Street.

As they stepped in front of the close, dark screen of leaves, hand in hand, they had both ceased to be aware of their surroundings. For them, Wimbledon and their hosts were melted into a pale, misty sea. They were back again on Italian soil, their beloved home of light and life, of art and beauty. No cold Age of Machinery had yet clipped the sparkling butterfly wings, no French Revolution had yet shorn the gay butterfly heads by that simple device of a triangle of steel in two uprights of wood. The eighteenth century, radiant, irresponsible, incredibly seductive, dying, yet with the fresh airs of unpainted youth, still breathed its familiar fascination as Harlequin and Columbine, those two darlings of her old age, became incarnate once more on a night of English moonshine.

Quickly stepping aside into the shadow, Quin left Bina in the centre of the green semicircle, until his moment should come to join her.

She was in her part now, head raised, lips smiling, ear attuned to some delicate under-harmony heard by her alone, played by the capricious swinging of the flower bells, by the measured rustle of the leaves, by the tide in the wash of moonlight, rising higher and higher in a liquid, mellow flood. Who shall say what innocent hypnotism came into play, but the fact is, that as she rose tiptoe on her little black slippers, as gently as a curl of foam upon the arching crest of a wave, as she trembled there, white arms outspread, brown head bent and pensive, her modern frock seemed to waver and lose its typical outline, seemed to melt,

to coalesce, to expand into the gauzy, frosted-silver, diamond-powdered ballet-skirts of Columbine.

How she bent and swayed on those beautiful, slender legs, how the complicated movements of that fairy dance became each subtle ripple of her strong, graceful, young body!

After those first airy rushes, as of some caged bird released of a sudden into the night and the woods, the fragile figure drooped, as if weary, dragging one rounded arm like a broken wing, trembling anew on the tips of those marvellous toes—looking, watching, waiting, making moan for its mate. In the deep mysterious light, deserted Columbine, alone, forsaken, bending, swaying, quivering, arching that long, supple throat, shudders from one fantastic, swoonlike pose to another until she lies relaxed upon the ground, her draperies, the petals of some huge, soft, night flower fallen in the moonlight, her body its slender broken stem. Never was such delicate art married to such poetic beauty.

The circle of enchanted watchers held their breath.

As she crouched there, bruised, pathetic, a new *motif* stole upon your senses—vigorous, masculine, breathing of the heart of the wild wood, of the salt, strong breath of the sea. With no warning rustle, with no premonitory snapping of the screening twigs, the leafy curtain seemed to open to the proper touch of a god, and, with one magnificent bound, as of some lithe, particoloured panther, Harlequin launched his beautiful body, fine as tempered steel, straight across the sylvan stage, to alight as soundlessly as a drifting leaf beside the fair, swanlike shape that was Columbine, every admir-

able line of his person disclosed in his close, glittering, diamond-barred disguise.

Ah, what a meeting was that! With what art and grace the figures melted, only to spring apart, floating, concealing, discovering themselves in the woven mazes of the intricate dance. Then the love-chase began, the airy, sparkling form of Columbine, retreating, returning, tempting, mocking; Harlequin pursuing, baffled, frustrated, maddened, the black velvet mask hiding alike his sorrow, his pleading, and his fury. With what superb vigour, with what exact technique did the two protagonists work out their complicated measures!

Their audience, fascinated into immobility, hung upon their every movement. There was not a sound save the night-song of the garden, that low, babbling, monotonous undertone, or perhaps the soft padding of the dancers' feet, the impact of hand to hand, of arm to waist or shoulder.

But the end is drawing near, with Columbine on the verge of that final surrender she alone knows how to make so shudderingly sweet. The delicate arms relax, the head hangs with its starry crown, the little feet can no longer sustain those airy, tantalizing flights; the bird is hovering over the snare. And Harlequin? How the fire of his approaching triumph leaps within him, feeding the vigour of those dizzying bounds, intensifying the grace of each onrush by which he seeks to capture and to hold his elusive love!

One more feverish burst of energy, and for the last time Columbine escapes his hungry arms, dipping under them, slipping through his fingers as lithe as quick-

silver, laughing as she twinkles, swaying, bending, recovering, relapsing, on those fair, arched feet that are like fire flashes.

He stands, his breast heaving, every muscle magnificently tense, waiting for his final moment.

It comes.

"Good Lord, how fine!" mutters Varian to himself.

She wavers, quivering, languishing, falling into the swoonlike poses of the dying swan that beats its silver wings, fainter and more faint. Slowly, lower and lower sinks the lovely body, the knees are unstrung, the head droops on the white breast, a shudder passes down the beautiful slender back; she looks up at him; she is at his feet; she is his.

Ah, what a rush of the night wind in the pines, what a singing together of the stars in their courses! With a leap he is upon her. With an exultant mustering of every force in that so finely-modelled frame, he lifts her in his arms, holding her at their utmost stretch like a white banner to shake in the face of gods and men. She hangs in his grasp, limp as a broken wand, pale, transparent, immeasurably touching. Carrying her so, this white rose of his, he disappears once more into the shadows. The dance of Harlequin and Columbine is over.

That silence that is the truest homage to the beautiful in art or in life was not broken until Quin and Bina, hand in hand as before, moved once more across the semicircle of turf. You rubbed your eyes; what had happened? Gone the sparkling dress of Columbine, the diamond-barred tights of Harlequin. Quin and Bina, flushed, rather breathless, radiantly happy, are

dressed as befittingly for a London street as they had been before their amazing performance.

Gita, even Gita, the languid, the self-contained, drew a long-sighing breath; Anie was white as her frock; Varian, more like his Van Dyck prototype than ever, with tossed hair, a slight flush, and dilated pupils, was moved to the very depths of the hedonist that was in him; Bee had had all her little conventional notions knocked about her ears; never had she dreamed that a mere man could be so beautiful. Her point of view would have amused Quin for a week could he have had an inkling of it.

But Panta, poor Panta could have crawled off in silence somewhere to weep those slow, difficult tears of old age. It was too touchingly beautiful to be borne, this recrudescence of the past—still youthful fair, still captivatingly gallant, fine and free. Names rang in his ears, friends and comrades with whom he had wandered Italy—all dead, lost, gone, forgotten. Their knell boomed now too dolefully across this moonset garden, in this far, foreign land.

Bina, lovingly sympathetic, divined how it was with him. Kneeling impulsively in front of his chair, she laid her arms about his waist, and asked like a child:

“Did I do it well? Did you like me?”

It broke the spell. This was no longer the enchanting Columbine who had wrung his heart with unappeasable longing, this was his own pretty Bina, the goddess of the hearth, the mistress of the little shop, the loving protectress of his safe, homely days. It was a relief to feel her so. He straightened his white head and produced a smile for her.

"You were very beautiful, very fleet and graceful, my dear. Quin has taught you well, and I must say for you that you take in what he tells you."

"Rather!" exclaimed a transfigured Quin, standing over them. What a change in the dark, quiet face, what fire in the ordinarily sombre eye!

Bina would not look at him. She was feeling too acutely herself just at that moment.

Varian at this point drew her attention, and presently they were all talking at once, even Gita, in a friendly endeavour to express their delight in this exquisite glimpse of a difficult art that had been so freely given them.

"You, who dance as you do, must be surfeited with well-meant but not inspired appreciation," said Gita to Quin, willing to show him by her look and her manner how genuinely moved she had been.

But Quin had no professional airs.

"Indeed, no; I am as greedy of compliments as a boy. I haven't danced as I have to-night for ages. Most of my energy goes into teaching. But how delicious is my Columbine! What man would she not inspire?"

"She is very beautiful; very good and beautiful," said Gita slowly. "You will be happy together."

Quin shot a look at her.

"You saw, then?" he breathed.

"Saw and felt, my dear man," laughed Gita in reply. "One is not made of stone."

"What a night to live through," he went on, after the silent drop of a pause, "here in your charming garden, with this moon, and this perfume, and your

delicate sympathy. A man in love may be pardoned for losing his head."

"Say, on the contrary," broke in Gita, "that if he doesn't, he isn't."

"Hark to my mother," interrupted Varian, who had been telling Bina, with all the resources of his vocabulary, what a lovely Undine she would make. "I never realized till I overheard this last speech of hers, the immense subtlety and enormous range of our wonderful English tongue—'if he doesn't, he isn't'—by Jove, positively cryptic, and yet you could scarcely put it (whatever it is!) more simply, and speak."

"Impertinent one!" cried Anie. "Hereafter you shall use nothing but Mammamouchi."

"If you use it with me, I shall not revolt."

Before that look and that touch of the hand, Anie was happily dumb.

But Varian rattled on.

"Now that we have said everything we possibly can think of to express to these wonderful people what pure, unalloyed joy they have given us, let me ask you this simple question, mother, here, before us all: Did you in your whole life ever hope to see such dancing? Dancing of this *genre*, you understand, my dear people, is a godlike exercise; no mere mortal could possibly do it. And now, again, since we, like—who the deuce were they?—Philemon and Baucis, are the entertainers of divinities, first of all, let us do the proper thing, to wit: bring out the mixing-bowl and the wine cup and—have a jolly good, long drink!"

They laughed, and thereby dropped down several degrees to a more normal plane. Emotion such as they

had all been experiencing, according to their various capacities, is apt to give too abrupt a turn to the screw. Also, since it is as well to ease off the reaction by a counter-irritant, Varian's jolly long drink provides one of the simplest and most pleasing. The boy was no mean psychologist.

So they bestirred themselves, leaving to the moonlight and the wandering breeze, to the insects and the small creatures of the night, the deserted stage, that turf semicircle that seemed to Quin's bedazzled eyes still to guard the fragrant, intoxicating souvenir of a white, melting shape of love and beauty.

They straggled in an uneven procession across the lower terrace, skirting the lime tunnel, now inky black, treading the narrow paths, a pale, chalkish white in the moonlight, pulling a flower here and there, a drooping rose, pallid and ghostly, too fair to be resisted. Gita presently had her free hand full; with the other she leaned gently on old Mr. Panta, who seemed to like the delicate attention. Such graceful dependence in a pretty woman was eminently fitting. Bee was on his other side. That, also, was as it should be, for it left Bina to Quin and Anie to Varian, a disposition of persons that certain tumultuous heart-beats imperiously demanded, and that the will of man manœuvred to secure.

They sipped their amber wine that bubbled in tall, fragile glasses, as they sat once more in the shadow of the Poussin. No one minded long, intimate pauses, for the sentimental agitation in which more than one of them found himself disposed to silence—coloured enough, hot enough, imageful enough, but internal,

subterranean. Quin was dreaming of the dark, cool, smoky back room in which Panta, poor tired Panta having gone upstairs, he was so soon to hold out impatient, so-long-defrauded, so-long-empty, eager, grasping arms to a Bina, miraculously softened, who would come at last into them, their willing prisoner, demanding nothing better than such incarceration. Heavens! how life had it in it to pay, to pay you gloriously, the measure heaped up, dripping, oozing gold and myrrh, to pay you for all the darkness, the agony, the deferred longing, the infinite *ennui*! Quin had no quarrel with Universal Law to-night. Instead, he hugged its majestic symbols to himself, as though they were indeed the dark head and soft breast of his so-coveted Columbine. So he dreamed; a pleasing study in Gita's quizzical eye, for she was always tender to love when it broke out its own true colours to the breeze, and the flapping of the silken banner was distinctly audible in Quin's vicinity. Bina heard it, too, and her heart grew big within her. She could hold off no longer. The dying swan had shown her plainly where she stood. She, also, thought of the quiet back room, so soon to become a sanctuary, a temple, a home. Altogether, it was a most successful evening, although the principal guests were thus reduced to quivering, eloquent silence.

Varian insisted upon taking them up himself in the car, for the rush through the night air, his hand on the throat of the powerful metal beast who bore them, appealed to his heated fancy. The moon, the shadowy garden, the exquisite interlude of the dance, the antique songs sobbing out of his Anie's warm young throat,

had all moved him mightily, and he knew he would not sleep did he not work off a certain amount of boyish excitement. So it was arranged that Varian was to drop his guests in Countess Street, returning himself at once to Wimbledon.

They made their adieux, not wearily, perfunctorily, as we so often do, standing on one foot from very boredom, but with a close, warm pressure of friendly hands, indicative of sympathy, of strong liking, of exchanged pledges of future comradeship. Gita kissed Bina, holding the girl for a moment in her gentle clasp. She knew how Quin's eye was kindling, although she did not look. Panta and Bee had struck out sparks of common interest, and one could see that the whole Wimbledon household would presently consider the little shop in Countess Street an indispensable house-of-call whenever care or pleasure should draw them Londonward.

Gliding back slowly, almost noiselessly, alone in the deep, perfumed heart of the night, Varian was conscious of nothing in the whole pale, dim expanse of the house save those white roses hanging, heavy and sweet, around Anie's windows.

Quiet scenes of victorious love were being enacted when the early autumnal dark closed in on the snug, brown room in Countess Street. Here the threads of life had been spinning a deeper, richer background for this new flamy pattern than anything the combined experience of Ambry and Estelle, of Varian and Anie, could present. Here the cloud-capped years sank away in a full deposit of tears and laughter, of hope, of trust, of unquenchable loyalty, and from this teeming soil

what fair crop might not be looked for, Cubical though it be?

So thought Quin, with rapturous anticipation, as he let himself in each afternoon, returning earlier and earlier from his hurried lessons, drawn as irresistibly as by a magnet. He mentally cursed the inoffensive stray customer whom he sometimes ran over in the shop, scarcely daring to look at Bina as he passed. With what a deep, burning, heart-fed glow would his eyes meet hers an instant later, as she slipped through the door with the minute glass pane, pushing it to behind her, enclosing them thus, for their first inarticulate meeting, within the precincts of this warm, dim, brown, smoky shrine, the shrine where so many tranquil hours had sped by, lapping them in a delicious, drowsy content.

The drawn curtains, disclosing the stately stalk of coloured birds across their buff expanse, hid the trail of early fog, or the slanting rush of sleety rain, the October evening hemming them in, happy mariners, marooned on some warm, glowing, sunset isle, concealing hidden caves of Aladdin.

Panta would creep down presently, if it were tea-hour or supper-hour, some wise, ancient book under his arm, to sink into his habitual yawning chair, to toast his slippered feet at the cheerful blaze, to regard with tired, happy, benignant eyes the two beings who were all his world.

The outward aspect of things was unchanged. Quin smoked his pipe at the fireside as of old; Bina, at her little table with the lamp, bent her brown head over her web of knitting, or made up her housewifely accounts,

but, inwardly, what a deep, rushing tumult in two hearts as of a newly-released spring torrent, the ice-glen at the source broken, melted, the waters leaping down the mountainside under the hot sun, flecked and gleaming with a thousand rainbow-dazzling spears! If you were a sensitive like Panta, you would have felt the glow the moment you entered the room; you would have heard the song the water drops sang as they fell, one sparkling bead after another, wearing away in these two lovers the last cloudy deposits of individualism, of egotism, of pride.

Of course, they had furiously discussed the question of keeping on the shop, Quin, in his fire-new rôle of prospective husband—irresponsible Harlequin, “where the bee sucks, there suck I,” gone for ever—having become intensely *bourgeois*, revolted at the idea of his very own—well, we must make up our mind to come out with the sacred word—of his very own wife, presenting her ineffable person in the guise of a pretty little woman who sold milk and cream, butter and eggs, and who served you herself, observe, as gay and as fresh as the dawn. What Harlequin had thought a pleasing masquerade, Mr. Quin was beginning to envisage as a sacrilege. Also, spurred on by his new responsibilities, he had brought the fat Heffendorfer to excellent terms; his private lessons were increasing, and thus, keeping his toes to the grindstone, enough golden guineas would roll in to pay for roof and food, warmth, shelter, a little maid, and roses, roses all the way.

But obstinate Bina made absurd objections. He, the light of her eyes, the lodestone of her life (teasing baggage!), would be away till teatime every day. Then,

what, pray, was to amuse her? Panta would be off on the trail of another "Immortal Gymnast," or stalking shy birds of that feather in Shaftesbury Avenue, so why should she not keep on the little shop in which they all took a sneaking pride? In fact—clinching argument!—who would attend to the Wimbledon milk if she didn't?

Quin, unconvinced, but in his present weakened state constitutionally incapable of denying her anything, did what he knew and what she knew he'd do from the beginning—gave in. This proof of her supremacy in domestic councils having been accorded her, Bina followed what her warm young heart bade her do, and signed the death-warrant of the shop on the spot by remarking, negligently, that they might as well be keeping an eye open for a cottage in the country. Panta then might realize the dream of a lifetime by studying the strange bee-people, and she could potter about a little dairy and garden of her very own.

To hear her thus body forth the fair substance of certain secret, airy constructions of his own, reconciled Quin to a few intermediate months of the old life.

With the oncoming of spring, with the crocus and the illusive cuckoo, whose taunting call someone was sure to signal across the barren meadows, would well up the overmastering desire for the path by the hedges, for the cottage nest, they, as sober married folk, must be preparing.

How the lark-song of it beat in his throat as he turned and fixed her, his Columbine! How their hands met and clung, transmitting no cloud-current now sub-

tly to pass from palm to palm! That magic circuit was broken for ever—overborne by the fuller pulse of Cubical life that throbbed in both of them, deep-toned as a cathedral bell, warm as the still core of subterranean fire.

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